

Biography of Roberta Luster, 1879-1920

Buried in historic African American cemetery, Evergreen, in Richmond, Virginia

Roberta Luster is not among lists of “notable” African Americans buried at the historic black cemetery Evergreen in Richmond, Virginia, but her gravesite is a popular stopping point by guests to the cemetery because her monument is one of the most beautiful and poignant. Who was Roberta Luster and why did someone choose such a beautiful way to remember her? Though her gravestone only notes that she was born on 6 June 1879 and died on 7 July 1920¹, research can flesh out some other details of her life. As is frequently the case with African American family history, however, documentation is often scarce².

Roberta’s parents were William Brent of Fauquier County and Henrietta (Brent)³ of Powhatan County. No confirmed documents for Henrietta can be found to indicate Henrietta’s maiden name or early



Gravesite of Roberta Luster in Evergreen Cemetery, Richmond, Virginia.

¹ Gravestone in historic African American Evergreen Cemetery, Richmond, Virginia; also, the 1900 census enumeration district 67, 1910 census enumeration district 71, and 1920 census enumeration district 68 confirm the approximate year. Full sourcing for the cited censuses is provided at the end of this document.

² One result of the research, however, shows that her husband, Joseph, was also to have been buried in Evergreen (in 1938) (according to his death certificate available on ancestry.com). Findagrave.com (accessed 2 July 2019) also provides date of birth as 1867, but the source of the information is unclear. The location of Joseph’s grave in Evergreen does not appear to be presently known, though there are many gravesites which haven’t been cleared or have headstones missing. A separate biography can be done for Joseph, but he will not be treated here except for as his life intersects with that of Roberta.

³ Ancestry.com: Death certificate of Roberta Luster.

life⁴, but the 1900 Census⁵ shows a William Brent, possibly Roberta's father, having been born in about 1830 in Virginia⁶. If this is the correct William Brent, he had remarried to Ella H. Brent, age listed in the 1900 census document as 45, in about 1895, and the family was living in the Huguenot District in Powhatan County where William Brent was working as a blacksmith. William's sons (who would have been Roberta's brothers) Charles, 19, a blacksmith as well, and Henry, 10, were living in the home.

By age 16, about 1895, Roberta had married⁷, had a son, William Thomas⁸, and moved out of the parental home⁹. Roberta's husband was Joseph with some records showing the middle initial "T" and some referring to him as Joe. Documents which provide his date of birth are widely divergent: 1851¹⁰, around 1860¹¹, around 1864¹², 1867¹³, around 1868¹⁴, around

⁴ The death certificate does not provide Roberta's mother's maiden name, nor does any other document which can be confirmed as to refer to Roberta's mother. In Ancestry.com's Marriage Records for Alabama, however, there is a record of a woman who is possibly Henrietta's daughter (Roberta's sister) Pauline. Connections to this document and this document itself provide some information that indicates that the Henrietta listed as Pauline's mother is the same Henrietta that is Roberta's mother. If this Pauline Jones is Henrietta's daughter, and at this point the connection is considered tenuous and unconfirmed, Harris may be Roberta's mother's maiden name. A variety of searches on "Henrietta Harris" were performed, but no documentation was found to directly connect Henrietta Harris to Roberta, and no documentation other than the Alabama records could be found to confirm or deny that this Roberta Luster is Pauline's sister. There is some documentation (the 1920 US census and Richmond city directories) that indicates a Henrietta Brent, who would have been the same age as Roberta's mother, was living with a family and working for them as a domestic in Richmond. Only cursory efforts to trace the lives of Roberta's parents or siblings were made after the time Roberta left home, and what was discovered is either in the text of this biography or in the footnotes. The same holds true for Roberta's children after they became adults.

⁵ 1900 Census enumeration district 66. William and Ella are shown in the census as only having been married five years. Also shown at the home, according to the census document, is William Lester, 5. Roberta's son William was about 5 years old in 1900. So, in general, names, ages, and places are logical; however, other documentation could not be found to confirm that this William Brent is the William Brent who is Roberta's father. All of these names are common in the area of this census; in fact, another William Brent appears on the same page. (Also noted: the 5-year-old's name is shown as Lester, whereas the family was not known to have been using that spelling of that name at the time. However, censuses of that era show that that there was far less concern about spelling consistency or accuracy.)

⁶ Ancestry.com: Gilmore Family Tree posted as of 5 June 2019 by user amgamgj; source of date and place of birth not provided.

⁷ Ancestry.com: 1900 census enumeration district 67 for Clay Ward, Richmond, Virginia, 1910 census enumeration district 71 for Clay Ward, Richmond, Virginia, and 1920 census district 68 for Clay Ward, Richmond, Virginia.

⁸ Ancestry.com: A Commonwealth of Virginia Delayed Certificate of Birth was issued to William Thomas on 1 May 1942 listing Roberta's age at William's birth as 16. The birth was attested to by Lillie Watson. Research documented herein notes that Lillie Watson was Roberta's sister. Roberta was deceased by the time of the issuance of William's delayed birth certificate.

⁹ Ancestry.com: 1900 census enumeration district 67 for Clay Ward, Richmond, Virginia, 1910 census enumeration district 71 for Clay Ward, Richmond, Virginia, and 1920 census enumeration district 68, for Clay Ward, Richmond, Virginia. Roberta is shown living in these three censuses as living with her husband and children.

¹⁰ Ancestry.com: 1910 census enumeration district 71 for Clay Ward, Richmond, Virginia.

¹¹ Ancestry.com: son William's delayed certificate of birth issued by the Commonwealth of Virginia, 1 May 1942.

¹² Ancestry.com: 1880 census for Broad Bay Township, Forsyth County, North Carolina, where Joseph may have been living; considerable documentation points to his being a native of Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

¹³ Ancestry.com: Commonwealth of Virginia Certificate of Death of Joseph Lester, 7 October 1938.

¹⁴ Ancestry.com: 1870 census for Middle Fork, Forsyth County, North Carolina.

1869¹⁵, and around 1880¹⁶. With these dates, Joseph could have been anywhere from the same age as Roberta to as much as 28 years her senior; the preponderance of documentation seems to lead to a conclusion that he was considerably older than she was.

In 1900, Roberta and Joseph were living with their son William, age 5 at the time, at 405 Linden Street in Richmond, where they rented a house within two blocks north of Hollywood Cemetery¹⁷. Joseph's age was listed as 33 to Roberta's, called "Bertie" on the census, 22. Joseph was working as a "turfer," a term used for "plowman" according to dictionaries, but it is possible that he dug graves at (white) Hollywood Cemetery since the 1930 census shows his occupation as "turfer in a cemetery." In 1900, Roberta was not working, and she is never shown with an occupation outside of the home through to her death. Also by 1900, Roberta and Joseph had added to their family: Lillie, a daughter, was 2 years old, and Laura, was a 4-month-old infant.

By 1910, the census shows the family still living at 405 Linden, Joseph still employed as a turfer¹⁸. They now had five living children, though Roberta had suffered the loss of one child, probably in infancy. Joseph's age was listed as 59 to Roberta's 32. Their children William, now 15, Lillie, now 11, and Laura, now 10, all attended school. Neither Roberta nor Joseph had had the benefit of a formal education, although while Roberta was noted as not being able to read and write in the 1900 census, by the 1910 census, she was shown as literate. Henrietta, 9, was now in the family and was attending school. Lenora, 4, was at home. And living with the family, according to the census, was Henry Brent, Roberta's 20-year-old brother who was, like Joseph, working as a turfer.

By 1920, the family had moved to 1600 Claiborne Street¹⁹ in Richmond's Randolph neighborhood, still within very close walking distance to the Riverview and Mt. Calvary (white) cemeteries which lie just to the west of Hollywood Cemetery. Significant at this time is that sometime between 1910 and 1920, the whole family changed the spelling of their last name from "Luster" to "Lester," the latter spelling appearing in the 1920 census and all other subsequent records for all family members. The only documented exception to the Lester spelling after 1920 is that of Roberta's burial monument, placed on her grave only seven months later after the 1920 census and which still carried the name Luster. It may be that her survivors thought that most people who knew her would know her best by the old name. It is not known why the family changed their last name. Because all subsequent records show the family with the Lester patronymic, it will be used from here forward in this document.

¹⁵ Ancestry.com: 1900 census enumeration district 67 for Clay Ward, Richmond, Virginia.

¹⁶ Ancestry.com: 1920 census enumeration district 68 for Clay Ward, Richmond, Virginia.

¹⁷ Ancestry.com: 1900 census enumeration district 67 for Clay Ward, Richmond, Virginia, 1910 census enumeration district 71 for Clay Ward, Richmond, Virginia, and 1920 census for Clay Ward, Richmond, Virginia. Today the location of their home is divided from Hollywood Cemetery by Richmond's Downtown Expressway.

¹⁸ Ancestry.com: 1910 census enumeration district 71 for Clay Ward, Richmond, Virginia.

¹⁹ Ancestry.com: 1920 census enumeration district 68 for Clay Ward, Richmond, Virginia.

In the 1920 census, Joseph and Roberta's age were both listed as 40 and renting the home still at 1600 Claiborne Street. William, now 24, was working as a laborer in a paper factory. Lillie, 21, was a laundress with an outside family, Laura, 19, was shown as working as a maid "cleaning estate" (sic). Neither the two children Henrietta, 18, or Lenora, 13, were working. William, at age 19, had married Cornelia Johnson²⁰, aged 17, on 4 October 1914²¹. In this enumerated page of the census, Cornelia, 23, a laundress for an outside family, and William are shown as living with Joseph and Roberta, along with their daughters Thelma, 4, and Dorothy, 2. William's family seems to have been double counted as they also appear on another enumerated page of the 1920 census²² as living at 1832 Wallace Street, about a five-minute walk north from Joseph and Roberta. On that census page, William is shown as 24, renting the home, and working as a laborer at a paper mill. Cornelia, 22, is shown as not working outside the home, and daughters Thelma, 5, and Dorothy, 2½, are also shown as living at the Wallace Street address. All US censuses currently available to the public list race. And in all cases except one, all family members listed in this present document are identified as "black," "negro," or "colored," depending on the cultural sensitivities and collection rules of the census at the time. The only exception to these descriptions for all the family members is the description of the "color of race" (as it is described on the 1920 census form) for Thelma and Dorothy, who are shown in the 1832 Wallace Street census page as "mulatto." Identification of race seemed to have been done by the census taker by sight²³, although it is not clear how race designations were made when persons who normally resided at the home were not present at the time of the visit of the census taker.

Roberta died on 7 July 1920 at age 42 of cerebral apoplexy (stroke) with high blood pressure as a contributing factor²⁴. Death certificates at the time did not list place of death, so it is not known if she was hospitalized, but she appears to have lingered a few days as the attending physician, W. J. West, noted he had attended her for four days. She was interred at Evergreen Cemetery by the funeral establishment of A.D. Price, the prominent African American Richmond undertaker. Her husband, using the name then of Joseph Lester, paid \$50 for her gravesite at section 140, lot B-1, an amount about double compared to others being sold at the same time in the same area of the cemetery²⁵.

Only official documents follow Roberta through her life. She does not appear in any newspaper accounts; there is not even a notice of her death in *The Richmond Planet*, the noted African American newspaper in operation at the time, although this was not at all unusual.

²⁰ Ancestry.com: last name Johnson appears on daughter Thelma's 17 February 1915 birth certificate.

²¹ Ancestry.com: Commonwealth of Virginia Decree of Divorce, 14 May 1935.

²² Ancestry.com: 1920 census enumeration district 74 for Clay Ward, Richmond, Virginia.

²³ <https://www.census.gov/history/pdf/1920instructions.pdf>, accessed 8 June 2019.

²⁴ Ancestry.com: Commonwealth of Virginia Certificate of Death, 10 July 1920.

²⁵ Evergreen Cemetery Association log of burials, undated but extant, available at the Library of Virginia (not catalogued); also available as a photocopy from the Evergreen Cemetery restoration organization which works through the Enrichmond Foundation, accessed 30 June 2019).

The Monument at Roberta Luster's Gravesite

The beauty of Roberta's memorial monument makes one wonder who placed it there and why. Though the family undoubtedly was poor, seemingly no expense was spared to memorialize her.

The female figure that is the monument at Roberta's grave seems unique in that it is of an older woman, perhaps of about the age when Roberta died; female figures in cemetery burial monuments are almost without exception those of young women or girls. It begs the question of whether the figure is Roberta's likeness, though no photograph of her can be found. The woman of the monument gazes downward, perhaps the head is bowed in prayer. Her hands hold the folds of her dress where she has gathered in roses. A scarf covers her head. Wings indicate her angelic status, but they are strong wings. She is nearly life-sized. She stands on a pedestal which contains Roberta's name, the date of her birth, and the date of her death. The combination of her height and the pedestal gives the impression of rising from the current forest floor which still seeks to encapsulate the monuments in this part of the cemetery where volunteers still struggle to reveal and protect the monuments from nature which is trying to repossess them.

Attempts to trace the origin of Roberta's monument are unsuccessful. She died unexpectedly, and her husband bought her burial lot the day after she died; there it is certain that the monument was not placed on her grave until sometime after her death. Roberta was very young at the time of her death; her oldest child was 25, her youngest, only 14. Perhaps the ache of losing their young mother when they themselves were so young led to a decision to memorialize her in this touching way. But also it appears likely that both her husband Joseph and brother Henry had worked many years as grave diggers in the three white cemeteries in Oregon Hill, full of monuments to the dead. Perhaps they knew who could memorialize her in this beautiful way and could leverage those relationships to purchase a monument at a price they could afford.

The 1920 Richmond City Directory lists three "monuments and tombstones" companies: J. Henry Brown, William R. Mason, and Charles C. Timmons, although there might have been others. All three were white-owned companies, but the Brown and Mason firms, at least, were also providing monuments and other structures²⁶ for Evergreen and the newly-established Woodlands (also a Richmond African American cemetery today recognized as historic) as well as other African American burial sites in other cemeteries. The records for the J. Henry Brown company are available only until 17 January 1921, and so if the monument were purchased through them, it most likely occurred after that. Records for the William R. Mason and Charles C. Timmons companies unfortunately apparently no longer exist. The possibility exists that the transaction might have been off the books no matter what the company if her husband was working a deal with a company owner he may have personally known and worked with. It may

²⁶ According to several Planet newspaper articles and the J. Henry Brown Monuments index of clients available at the Library of Virginia.

be notable, for example, that Timmon's company was co-located in the Hollywood Cemetery, very near Roberta and Joseph's home and where Joseph was very likely to have worked. Finally, a small possibility is that the monument could have been ordered. In the early decades of the 1900s, at least, cemetery monuments could be ordered from Sears and even Montgomery Ward.²⁷

Considerations for Further Research:

1. Roberta's mother's last name, as per footnote 4, is unconfirmed. Roberta's sister, Lillie, however, may have obtained a delayed birth certificate at age 35, approximately 1915, from the state of Virginia and it is possible that she listed her mother's last name. There is a \$12 cost and a 2- to 4-week delay for obtaining the birth certificate and so it has not been requested at this time.
2. Since Roberta was from Powhatan County, perhaps a search of Powhatan County records could reveal more information about her family. Her mother is also known to have been from Powhatan County. Her father was possibly from Fauquier County, and a search of that county's records might find more information. Both her mother and father were born before emancipation. A cursory attempt to breach the "brick wall" of slavery to trace Roberta's family past what is provided in this biography was unsuccessful, but there may be records available of which this writer is unaware.
3. Roberta's husband's burial location in Evergreen is currently unknown. It is unlikely, since he died several years later and after a subsequent marriage, that he was buried next to Roberta, but a search around her gravesite at Evergreen could confirm that. (Joseph's second wife was buried in a family cemetery in Fluvanna County, according to the 27 December 1931 Commonwealth of Virginia Certificate of Death for Pinkie K. Lester).
4. There are no doubt monument experts who would know more about architectural and other aspects of Roberta's monument. Though this document contains some speculative comments about the monument, it would be helpful for such an expert to review the comments and perhaps clarify and amplify them.

Full Citations for Censuses Used in this Biography (censuses were accessed at ancestry.com):

1870 U. S. Census, Forsythe County, North Carolina, population schedule, Middlefork Township, Walkertown Post Office, enumerated on 30 July 1870, p. 23, dwelling 160, family 160, Thomas Lester.

1880 U. S. Census, Forsythe County, North Carolina, population schedule, Broadbay Township, enumerated on 18 June 1880, p. 17, dwelling 155, family 158, Thomas Lester.

²⁷ A cursory look on the internet at some of these monument catalogues did not reveal any monuments similar to the one at Roberta's grave. It is this writer's opinion that the monument was custom, lending more credence that it could have been in Roberta's likeness.

1900 U. S. Census, Henrico County, Virginia, population schedule, Fifth Precinct, Richmond, Clay Ward, Enumeration District 67, enumerated on 14 June 1900, sheet 20, dwelling 363, family 415, Joseph Luster.

1900 U. S. Census, Powhatan County, Virginia, population schedule, Huguenot District (part of), Enumeration District 66, enumerated 18 June 1900, sheets 8-9, dwelling 135, family 139, William Brent.

1910 U. S. Census, Henrico County, Virginia, population schedule, Richmond City, Clay Ward, Enumeration District 71, enumerated 22 April 1910, sheets 13B-14A, dwelling 242, family 266, Joseph Luster.

1920 U. S. Census, Henrico County, Virginia, population schedule, Richmond City, Clay Ward, Enumeration District 68, enumerated on 10 January 1920, sheet 7B, dwelling 144, family 160, Joseph T. Lester.

1920 U. S. Census, Henrico County, Virginia, population schedule, Richmond City, Clay Ward, Enumeration District 74, enumerated on 9 January 1920, sheet 2B, dwelling 26, family 28, William Lester.