

FIVE DROWNED AS BOAT SINKS AT BURGESS FALLS

Putnam County Herald, Cookeville, TN
Thursday, 30 July 1931

Jeremiah Whitson, His Wife, With Mrs. Mary Whitson Barnett, And Her Two Boys Are Victims: Three Others Narrowly Escape

WERE ON AFTERNOON PICNIC OUTING

Two of Dead Children Of Judge and Mrs. H. D. Whitson Of Cookeville: Mrs. Barnett Wife Of Nashville Mail Carrier, And Former School Teacher Here

PARENTS, FAMILY AND FRIENDS GRIEF STRICKEN

Tragedy stalked the placid waters of Falling Water River Wednesday at dusk when five persons, a man with his wife, and a mother with her two children, were drowned at Burgess Falls as a motor boat sank in water 18 feet deep. Three other occupants were saved.

Jeremiah Whitson, 35, and his wife, Alice Smith Whitson, 33, residents of Cookeville, and Mrs. Mary Whitson Barnett, of Nashville, and her sons, Robert, 2, and James, 5, are dead. Annie Pearl and Lucy Whitson and Beecher Cass, the other occupants, narrowly escaped.

The party had entered the boat at the hydro-electric power dam, and had motored up the river for perhaps a half mile. They were on an afternoon picnic outing. Most of them were standing on the front end of the boat, Mr. Cass said, and when it started sinking it went down quickly, almost before warning could be given. The boat was about 24 feet long and was of the cabin type, with a top, doors being located at front and rear, the sides being screened. Mr. Cass was forced to swim from the rear of the boat, where he was piloting, to the front end, a box and barrel having blocked the rear entrance. He was pulled from the river later by Lucy Whitson.

FISHERMAN HELPS

J. Cole, resident of Burgess Falls, was fishing near the scene of the tragedy when he heard screams for help, and when he got to the scene saw Annie Pearl Whitson struggling near where the boat sank. He called instructions to her, and went after her in his boat. She swam for the first time in her life.

News of the tragedy sent thousands hurrying to the scene. Cookeville boys, and residents of Burgess Falls worked together in recovering the bodies. The boat was lifted at about 11 o'clock Wednesday night, about four hours after it sank. Three bodies, those of Mrs. Whitson and the two Barnett children, were recovered with the boat. Dr. John Q. Owsley made an attempt at resuscitation, but was unsuccessful.

CURIOUS GATHER

Crowds of morbidly curious milled around the spot where the bodies lay as they were taken from the river, making orderly recovery work almost impossible. The scene was ghastly in the light of a full moon almost directly overhead.

Bodies of Jeremiah Whitson and Mrs. Barnett were not recovered until after midnight.

CITY EMPLOYEE

Jeremiah Whitson and Mrs. Barnett were children of Judge and Mrs. H. D. Whitson of Cookeville. Mr. Whitson was for many years county Judge of Putnam County and later served as road supervisor.

Mrs. Barnett was a former teacher in the Cookeville City school. She was the wife of J. P. Barnett, Nashville mail carrier.

**JOINT FUNERAL SERVICES HELD FOR
FIVE DROWING VICTIMS AT HOME FRIDAY**

Putnam County Herald, Cookeville, TN

Thursday, 6 August 1931

Thousands Gather At Whitson Home to Hear Last Rites
For Figures In Burgess Falls Tragedy;
Steel, Edwards, and Jarvis Conduct Service

Joint funeral services for Mr. and Mrs. Jeremiah Whitson, Mrs. J. P. Barnett and her two sons, Robert, 2, and James, 5, were held at the residence of Judge and Mrs. H. D. Whitson on Sparta road Friday afternoon. Burial took place in the City Cemetery.

A crowd of approximately 4,000 people gathered at the home to pay their respects to the quintet who were drowned when the boat in which they were riding at Burgess Falls sank on Wednesday night.

Services were conducted by the Rev. E. M. Steel, pastor of the Methodist Church of Cookeville, assisted by the Rev. Sam Edwards, of the First Baptist Church, of Nashville.

A motorcade, extending for more than a mile followed the three funeral coaches which carried the bodies to their graves.

Cookeville merchants, in response to a proclamation issued by Mayor Ezra Davis Friday morning, closed their places of business for two hours Friday afternoon.

DROWNED AT BURGESS FALLS

Four of the five members of the Whitson family who were drowned at Burgess Falls last Wednesday when the motorboat in which they were riding sank in 18 feet of water.

On the left is shown Jeremiah Whitson, city employee, and his sister Mrs. Mary Lee Whitson Barnett. On the right is shown the two Barnett children, James, 5 and Robert, 2, right. The other victim, Mrs. Jeremiah Whitson, is not shown in the pictures. The cut is a courtesy of the Nashville Tennessean.



COOKEVILLE CITY CEMETERY

Cookeville, Putnam Co., TN

(One large headstone for all, names and dates on foot markers, **boat accident happened at Burgess Falls Dam**, near Glade Creek. Members same family, 29 July 1931.

***Harvey Denton Whitson**, b. 15 May 1870, TN - d. 23 October 1951, s/o Jeremiah M. Whitson & Sarah "Sallie" Barnes.

***Etta (Farley) Whitson**, b. 20 February 1871, TN - d. 3 May 1941, d/o Howard Farley & Caroline Dyer.

***Robert Jeremiah Whitson**, b. 28 October 1897, TN – d. **29 July 1931**, s/o Harvey Denton Whitson & Etta Farley, pg. 50: 1910 census.

***Alice Virginia (Smith) Whitson**, b. 31 January 1895, TN - d. **29 July 1931**

Annie Pearl Whitson, b. 20 August 1909, TN – d. 23 December 1976, d/o Harvey Denton Whitson & Etta Farley. She is the sister of **Lucy Whitson**. Annie Pearl & Lucy Whitson and Beecher Cass narrowly escaped drowning at the boat accident at Burgess Falls Dam.

Alice Lou Whitson, b. 25 October 1895, TN – d. 12 August 1972, d/o Harvey Denton Whitson & Etta Farley

***Howard Harvey Whitson**, b. 31 August 1905, TN – d. 6 March 1984, s/o Harvey Denton Whitson & Etta Farley. Howard & Elizabeth Whitson had a daughter named Carolyn who lives in Cookeville, TN.

***Elizabeth (Nichols) Whitson**, b. 19 October 1905 – d. 12 March 1974, d/o Alex Walter Nichols & Mary E. Carr. Her parents are both buried in Cookeville City Cemetery, Putnam Co., TN.

***Mary Lee (Whitson) Barnett**, b. 9 January 1901, TN – d. **29 July 1931**, d/o Harvey Denton Whitson & Etta Farley. Husband: James P. Barnett.

***James P. Barnett**, b. 18 June 1894 – d. 8 October 1973

(SS Death Index: Name: **JAMES P BARNETT** - Birth: 18 Jun 1894 – Death: 8 Oct 1973– Age: 79 – Last Residence: Nashville, Davidson, TN 37110 - Last Benefit: (not specified) – SSN: 408-64-4090 Issued By: Tennessee).

James Harry Barnett, b. 21 April 1925, TN – d. **29 July 1931**, s/o James P. Barnett & Mary Lee Whitson.

Robert Harvey Barnett, b. 15 March 1930, TN – d. **29 July 1931**, s/o James P. Barnett & Mary Lee Whitson.

Note: The **Barnett family** lived in Cookeville until the early 1930s during the days of the Great Depression when **James** accepted a much-coveted position as a mail carrier in Nashville.

***Alex Walter Nichols**, b. 8 November 1873, TN – d. 29 January 1965

* **Mary E. (Carr) Nichols**, b. 22 March 1906 – d. 15 May 1921, d/o Charles Burton Carr &

* **Mae (Walker) Nichols**, b. 4 December 1895 – d. 28 April 1976

Note: **Alex Walter Nichols**, s/o **Moses Jasper Nichols & Robena Katharine "Kittie" Ross**, d/o **Samuel Neal Ross & Susan Hargrove Dowlin**. **Moses Jasper Nichols**, s/o **David Henry Nichols & Elizabeth Ann "Besty" Jared**.

Note: **Alex Walter Nichols**, b. 8 November 1873 – d. 29 January 1965 & his wife **Mary E. (Carr) Nichols**, b. 22 March 1906 – d. 15 May 1921 both buried in the Cookeville City Cemetery, Putnam Co., TN. **Alex Walter Nichols later married Mae Walker**, b. 4 December 1895 – d. 28 April 1976, she is also buried next to Walter and Mary Nichols in the Cookeville City Cemetery, Putnam Co., TN. **Mary E. (Carr) Nichols**, d/o **Charles Burton Carr & ?**. **Charles Burton Carr**, s/o **Andrew F. "Dick" Carr & Carolyn Stillman Jared**.

BOILING SPRINGS CEMETERY

Putnam Co., TN

***James Beecher**, b. 15 August 1890 – d. 28 March 1955

***Manda (Hickey) Cass**, b. 24 January 1892 – d. 13 March 1970

SALEM CEMETERY

Putnam Co., TN

***Jeremiah M. Whitson**, b. 19 November 1834, TN - d. 27 October 1917 (*Masonic emblem*)

***Sallie (Barnes) Whitson**, b. 24 April 1837, TN – d. 14 November 1925

Mansfield Eskew Whitson, b. 6 March 1865, TN – d. 2 November 1942, s/o Jeremiah M. Whitson & Sarah “Sallie” Barnes.

1850 census Dist. 11, Jackson Co., TN

Dwl: 1276

Andrew Carr 31 M W Farming TN (*Andrew F. “Dick” Carr, s/o Joseph Henry M. Carr & Naomi Jared*)

Caroline Carr 18 F W TN (*Carolyn Stillman Jared, d/o Joseph Jared & Dorcas Byrne*)

Jane Carr 1 F W TN

Burton Carr 8/12 M W TN (*Charles Burton Carr*)

1860 census 1st Civil Dist., Putnam Co., TN

Dwl: 44

Jeremiah Whitson 25 M W (value of real estate, 1, 000) (value of personal estate, 800) TN

Sarah Whitson 22 F W TN (*Sallie Barnes*)

Alice Whitson 4 F W TN

John Whitson 2 M W TN

Catherine Whitson 1/12 F W TN

1860 census Dist. 11, post office Byrne, Putnam Co., TN

Dwl: 1219

A. F. Carr 42 M W Married Farmer TN (*Andrew F. “Dick” Carr, s/o Joseph Henry M. Carr & Naomi Jared*)

Caroline Carr 29 F W Married TN (*Carolyn Stillman Jared, d/o Joseph Jared & Dorcas Byrne*)

Darcus J. Carr 12 M W Single TN

Charles B. Carr 10 M W Single TN (*Charles Burton Carr*)

William S. Carr 8 M W Single TN

Rachel Carr 6 F W Single TN

Naomi Carr 4 F W Single TN (*Naomi Tennessee “Tennie” Kerr/Carr md George Washington Boyd*)

Mary E. Carr 3 F W Single TN

Rufus S. Carr 3/12 M W Single TN

1870 census 1st Civil Dist., Putnam Co., TN

Dwl: 168

J. M. Whitson 34 M W (value of real estate, 1, 500) (value of personal estate, 2,000) TN

Saroh Whitson 33 F W Keeping House TN

John P. Whitson 14 M W At Home TN

Catharine Whitson 10 F W At Home TN

Reubin Whitson 8 M W TN

Mansfield Whitson 6 M W TN

Soffrona Whitson 3 F W TN

Harvy D. Whitson 0 1/12 May TN

Catharine Whitson 68 F W KY

Census Place: 1880 District 1, Putnam Co., Tennessee

Source: FHL Film 1255275 National Archives Film T9-1275 Page 81B

Dwl: 78

	Relation	Sex	Marr	Race	Age	Birthplace
J.M. WHITSON	Self	M	M	W	45	TN
	Occ:	Farmer	Fa: KY	Mo: KY		
Sarah WHITSON	Wife	F	M	W	42	TN
	Occ:	Keeping House	Fa: NC	Mo: NC		
Alice WHITSON	Dau	F	S	W	22	TN
	Occ:	House Keeping	Fa: TN	Mo: TN		
Catharine WHITSON	Dau	F	S	W	18	TN
			Fa: TN	Mo: TN		
Safrona WHITSON	Dau	F	S	W	12	TN
			Fa: TN	Mo: TN		
Rubin WHITSON	Son	M	S	W	17	TN
	Occ:	Works On Farm	Fa: TN	Mo: TN		
Mansfield WHITSON	Son	M		W	14	TN
	Occ:	Works On Farm	Fa: TN	Mo: TN		
Harvy WHITSON	Son	M	S	W	10	TN
			Fa: TN	Mo: TN		
James WHITSON	Son	M	S	W	6	TN
			Fa: TN	Mo: TN		

1900 census 1st Civil Dist., Putnam Co., TN

Dwl: 80 Family: 81

Harvey Whitson Head 30 M W b. May 1870 M1 (6 yrs. md) **Attorney** TN TN TN

Etta Whitson Wife 29 F W b. February 1871 M1 (6 yrs. md) (2 children born, 2 children living) TN TN TN

Alice L. Whitson Dau 3 F W b. November 1896 Single TN TN TN

Jere Whitson Son 1 M W b. November 1898 Single TN TN TN

1900 census 1st Civil Dist., Putnam Co., TN

Dwl: 81 Family: 82

J. Whitson Head 65 M W b. November 1834 M1 (45 yrs. md) Farmer TN KY KY

Sallie Whitson Wife 63 F W b. April 1837 M1 (45 yrs. md) (2 children born, 2 children living) TN TN TN

Margaret C. Whitson Dau 38 F W b. May 1862 Single TN TN TN

James T. Whitson Son 27 M W b. April 1873 Farmer Single TN TN TN

1900 census 7th Civil Dist., Putnam Co., TN

Dwl: 107 Family: 107

Charles Carr Head 50 M W b. October 1849 M (10 yrs. md) Farmer TN TN TN

(Charles Burton Carr md 1st Martha Emeline Holliday, b. ca. 1860 – d. 7 March 1884)

Sarah A. Carr Wife 49 F W b. February 1851 M (10 yrs. md) (2 children born, 1 child living) TN TN TN

(Sarah Alabama “Bama” Witt md Charles Burton Carr. She was his 2nd wife)

Harvey F. Carr Son 7 M W b. August 1892 Single TN TN TN

(Harvey Francis Carr, b. 6 August 1892 – d. 6 December 1970, Oklahoma City, OK).

1910 census 1st Civil Dist., Cookeville Town, Putnam Co., TN

Dwl: 57 Family: 60

Harvey D. Whitson Head 59 M W M1 (15 yrs. md) **Ca Judge Putnam County** TN TN TN

Etta Whitson Wife 59 M1 (15 yrs. md) (6 children born, 6 children living) TN TN TN

Alice Whitson Dau 14 F W Single TN TN TN

Robert J. Whitson Son 12 M W Single TN TN TN

Mary L. Whitson Dau 9 F W Single TN TN TN *(Mary Lee Whitson md James P. Barnett)*

Howard H. Whitson Son 4 M W Single TN TN TN

Lucy Whitson Dau 2 F W Single TN TN TN

Anna P. Whitson Dau 8/12 F W Single TN TN TN

1910 census 7th Civil Dist., Putnam Co., TN

Dwl: 51 Family: 51

Charlie B. Carr Head 60 M W Widow General Farm Farmer TN TN TN
Harvey F. Carr Son 16 M W Single Farm Laborer Home Farm TN TN TN

1920 census 1st Civil Dist., Cookeville Town, Putnam Co., TN

Dwl: 319

Harvey D. Whitson Head 49 M W M **County Judge** TN TN TN
Etta Whitson Wife 48 F W M TN TN TN
Alice Lou Whitson Dau 24 F W Single TN TN TN
Mary Lee Whitson Dau 19 F W Single TN TN TN (*Mary Lee Whitson md James P. Barnett*)
Jeremiah Whitson Son 22 M W Inspector Spring Factory Single TN TN TN
Anna Whitson Dau 10 Single F W TN TN TN
Howard H. Whitson Son 14 M W Single TN TN TN
Lucy Whitson Dau 12 F W Single TN TN TN

1930 census 1st Civil Dist., Cookeville Town, 7th Street Putnam Co., TN

400 Dwl: 64 Family: 67

Mansfield Whitson Head 65 M W M (22 yrs. old 1st marriage) **Guard at Prison** TN TN TN
Mary Whitson Wife 52 F W M (17 yrs. old 1st marriage) TN TN TN
Mattie Whitson Dau 22 F W Single TN TN TN
Dave Whitson Son 26 M W Single TN TN TN
Coran Whitson Son 13 M W Single TN TN TN

1930 census 1st Civil Dist., Cookeville Town, 7th Street Putnam Co., TN

103 Dwl: 285 Family: 310

Harvey D. Whitson Head 59 M W M (24 yrs. old 1st marriage) **Supervisor Road Company** TN TN TN
Etta Whitson Wife 59 F W M (23 yrs. old 1st marriage) TN TN TN
Alice Whitson Dau 34 F W Single **Practical Nurse** TN TN TN
Lucy Whitson Dau 22 F W Single **Teacher Public School** TN TN TN
Anna Whitson Dau 20 F W Single **Teacher Public School** TN TN TN
Mary L. Barnett Dau 29 F W M (21 yrs. old 1st marriage) TN TN TN
(*Mary Lee Whitson md James P. Barnett*)
James H. Barnett Grandson M W 4 11/12 Single TN TN TN
Robert F. Barnett Grandson M W 0/12 Single TN TN TN

WHITSON FAMILY (#923)

Source: Heritage of Putnam County Tennessee – 2008 by Putnam County Heritage Book Committee and County Heritage Inc.

Pg. 330 – In 1875 about 40 years after Putnam County was added to the State of Tennessee, in 1854, and



recovering from the Civil War turmoil, people wanted to be taught all matters of life and its progress.

Education was the main topic that people preferred. Schools were built in various places in Putnam County and elsewhere. In the Cookeville area and surrounding communities, three young men became the teachers. The teachers were, Ernest Boyd (who later became an attorney), Monroe Hatfield (who later became a college professor), and Harve Whitson (who later became Judge of Putnam

County Court for two terms, a period of sixteen years).

Harve Whitson was presiding Judge in 1913; this was in the same year that the photo of his family was taken. The names of the Whitson family in the photo seated, wife Etta Farley Whitson, daughter Lucy Whitson, daughter Annie Pearl, father Harve Whitson, daughter Alice Whitson. In the back row, son Jeremiah Whitson, daughter Mary Lee Whitson, and son Howard Whitson.

During a summer season, Mary Lee and her two children were visiting the family in Cookeville. Jeremiah Whitson, his wife, and sister Annie Pearl took Mary Lee and her two children to Burgess Falls Lake for an evening of enjoyment riding in a boat on the lake. Jeremiah was an employee of the Cookeville Electric Department and was well trained about its condition and operation. The boat had a top cover with wire mesh over it and around it to protect anyone from falling overboard. When they were cruising along the lake, something happened to the boat that caused it to take on water. The boat was far from the shore, and it was in deep water.

Annie Pearl was the only one to free herself from the boat and she swam to the shore. The other five family members were unable to get out of the boat before it sank, and they all sank with the boat.

It was a great shock for the family, their relatives, neighbors, friends, and the Cookeville community. In those days there was not a funeral home that could handle that many bodies at one time. They took the five caskets to the lawn on the south side of the Cookeville Courthouse, for public viewing and funeral services.

My father, John Hollis Riddle, was an employee of Harve Whitson's farm, and I was a high school student at the time. We attended the funeral service, that took place seventy-five years ago.

The remaining Harve Whitson children went onto the following pursuits in their lives. Lucy and Annie Pearl became teachers, Alice worked in various offices when needed. Howard worked for the City of Cookeville.

Harve Whitson went onto be a farmer and livestock dealer after his two terms as being a judge.

The Whitson families lived one or two blocks apart from each other. They all lived very close to the Cookeville courthouse. The Whitson family was many in numbers, located throughout Putnam County. They were the foundation, growth, leaders, and developers in many areas of Putnam County's History.

Story by: Hurshal Riddle.

***Robert Jeremiah Whitson**, b. 28 October 1897, TN – **d. 29 July 1931**, s/o Harvey Denton Whitson & Etta Farley, pg. 50: 1910 census.

***Alice Virginia (Smith) Whitson**, b. 31 January 1895, TN - **d. 29 July 1931**

Robert Jeremiah Whitson

b. ----, TN

d. 29 Jul 1931

Age: 34y

Father: Harvey Whitson TN

Mother: Etta Farley, TN ----

City Cemetery Putnam Co., TN

DC #15853, Putnam Co., TN

Alice Virginia Whitson

b. ----, TN

d. 29 Jul 1931

Age: 36y 6m

Father: John Smith, TN

Mother: Mary Greer, TN
City Cemetery Putnam Co., TN
DC #15854, Putnam Co., TN

***Harvey Denton Whitson**, b. 15 May 1870, TN - d. 23 October 1951, s/o Jeremiah M. Whitson & Sarah "Sallie" Barnes.

***Etta (Farley) Whitson**, b. 20 February 1871, TN - d. 3 May 1941, d/o Howard Farley & Caroline Dyer.

Etta D. Farley Whitson
b. 20 Feb 1871, White Co., TN
d. 3 May 1941
Father: Howard Farley, White Co., TN
Mother: Caroline Dyer, White Co., TN
Spouse: Harvey D. Whitson
City Cemetery Putnam Co., TN
#11760, Putnam Co., TN

BOAT IN WHICH FIVE MET DEATH IS HELD UNSAFE BY EXPERTS

J. P. Barrett Sues City For \$150,000 In Death Of Wife, Two Children:

HARD LEGAL FIGHT SEEN:

A motor boat in which five members of one family were drowned at Burgess Falls July 29, 1931, yesterday was declared unworthy and not built according to government specification by three government boat experts in the \$150,000 damage suit against the city of Cookeville brought by J. P. Barnett, of Nashville, whose wife, Mary Lee Whitson Barnett, and two children, Robert and James, were victims.

The experts, J. D. McKenzie, C. I. Lamb, and A. G. Hill, testified that the boat was not properly equipped or constructed for use on a river and that it was unworthy for the purposes for which it was intended.

The suit, one of the largest damage cases ever tried here, was begun Tuesday, and it was indicated late yesterday that it would not go to the jury before Saturday. It promises to be one of the hardest fought legal battles in Tennessee.

Barnett is represented by Col. Worth Bryant, Judge F. E. Harris, former Governor A. H. Roberts, and Wade, of Nashville, while Holladay and Clark, of Cookeville, and Bradley McGinnis, of Carthage, represent the defendant city.

Went Straight Down:

Jeremiah Whitson and his wife were also drowned when the tragedy occurred. The boat sank in eighteen feet of water shortly after eight o'clock Wednesday night, July 29, 1931. Beecher Cass, driver of the boat testified Wednesday. Other survivors of the tragedy said that the boat was being driven up the river, and that water suddenly began pouring over the bow. Lucy Whitson, last witness Wednesday, said her brother, Jeremiah, called to the driver to turn the boat toward the shore. "Could you feel the boat turning?" she was asked. "No," she answered, "it just went straight down."

Miss Whitson saved Cass' life and her sister swam to the shore.

The city in its answer to the plaintiff's charges said it was "not guilty" in all three cases.

Putnam County Herald, Cookeville, TN: Thursday, 6 April 1933.

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