

Biographical Sketches

John R. Lott (Abt. 1785-1840) and Catherine Johnson Brown Lott Speer (1798–1891?)

John R. Lott was born about 1785 in Charlestown, Montgomery County, New York, a rural farming community in the Mohawk Valley that was still recovering from the disruptions of the American Revolution. During John's childhood, the region was being resettled by families from New Jersey and eastern New York who were drawn by affordable land and renewed opportunity. Farms were rebuilt, fields were cleared, and communities were reestablished, creating an environment that emphasized hard work.

Charlestown retained a strong Dutch cultural character well into the early nineteenth century. Religious life centered on the Dutch Reformed Church, which shaped moral values and reinforced close ties among interconnected families such as the Lotts, Johnsons, and Delines. Education was largely practical rather than formal. John likely learned basic reading and arithmetic alongside the skills essential to farming—clearing land, caring for livestock, and maintaining tools. Reputation, reliability, and family mattered more than written records, a reality that helps explain why John left few personal documents yet remained firmly embedded in his community.

This upbringing prepared John well for adulthood in a period marked by mobility and change. Raised in a household accustomed to migration, he was prepared to relocate as land prospects shifted westward. The resilience and adaptability he developed in Charlestown carried forward into his later years, first in western New York and eventually in Michigan.

Early Life and First Marriage

Catherine Jane Johnson was born on 14 January 1798, probably in Monmouth County, New Jersey. She came of age in a period when women's legal and economic rights were severely limited. Because property ownership, financial independence, and stable jobs were out of reach for women, Catherine relied on marriage and family support for survival.

Around 1817, Catherine married Joseph B. Brown, likely in New York, though no marriage record has yet been located. The 1820 census places Catherine and Joseph Brown in Northampton, Montgomery (later Fulton) County, New York, with two young sons. One of these sons is believed to have been Joseph Benjamin Brown, born in 1818. The identity of the second son remains unknown.

Joseph Brown died shortly after the 1820 census, probably between 1820 and 1821, leaving Catherine a young widow with children and no known land, probate, or estate records to provide financial security.

Marriage and the Formation of a Family

On 23 December 1821, John married Catherine, a young widow, in the Dutch Reformed Church at Fonda, Montgomery County, New York. This marriage aligned with long-standing Dutch religious traditions and reflects the shared cultural background of their families. Catherine brought at least

one child from her earlier marriage into the household, and together John and Catherine established a blended family that would grow quickly.

Following their marriage, John and Catherine lived in Monroe County, New York, likely in the town of Perinton. Their earliest children were born during this period, including John Ray, Martha Ann, and Peter. These births coincided with the broader migration of New York families into the Genesee Country during the 1820s. Families left the more settled Mohawk Valley as land grew scarce and expensive, drawn west by the availability of fertile, affordable farmland opened after the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825. For young families like the Lotts, Monroe County offered the prospect of land ownership, economic independence, and improved access to markets, making relocation a practical and forward-looking decision.

Migration to Michigan and Frontier Life

By about 1828, John and Catherine joined the westward flow of settlers into Michigan Territory, settling in Plymouth Township, Wayne County. At that time, Michigan was still a frontier region; statehood would not come until 1837. Dense forests, rough roads, and scattered log homes defined the landscape. Most settlers were recent arrivals from New York and New England, drawn by inexpensive land and a known migration route. Rising land prices in western New York, coupled with the availability of federal land in Michigan at favorable terms, encouraged families to move farther west in search of economic security. For the Lotts, Michigan offered the opportunity to acquire land of their own and establish a more sustainable future for a growing family than was possible in increasingly settled Monroe County.

Life for the Lott family revolved around clearing land, establishing a farm, and raising children under demanding conditions. John worked to convert woodland into productive acreage, while Catherine managed the household and bore children in quick succession. Their Michigan-born children included Cornelius, Nancy, Henry Bradley, Lydia Helen (our ancestor), Jane Catherine, and Daniel.

Social life centered on neighbors, shared labor, and informal religious gatherings rather than established institutions. Cash was scarce, making barter, cooperation, and self-sufficiency essential. Illness, accidents, and childbirth posed constant risks, and the absence of extended family nearby made daily life particularly challenging.

Despite these hardships, Plymouth also offered hope and opportunity. Roads gradually improved, land values increased, and connections to Detroit markets strengthened. John's purchase of five acres of land in April 1836 reflects cautious optimism and an intent to establish a permanent home. He sold this land in November 1837, possibly due to financial pressures or changing circumstances.

Death and Its Aftermath

The 1840 federal census recorded John R. Lott in Plymouth Township as a man aged fifty to fifty-nine. He died later that year, sometime after 1 June 1840 and before 28 September 1840, when Catherine purchased land in her own name—an action that strongly suggests she was already widowed.

At the time of John's death, Catherine was pregnant with their youngest child. Frances ("Fannie") was born in 1841 in Plymouth. John left no known probate record, and his burial place remains unknown. His early death left Catherine with many young children and shaped the course of the family's future.

Although John's documentary footprint is limited, the lives of his children—documented across New York, Michigan, Illinois, and Iowa—preserve his legacy and provide the strongest evidence for reconstructing his origins and family connections.

Widowhood and Continued Migration

John's death in 1840 left Catherine widowed for the second time. In November 1841, she sold her remaining quarter-acre of land in Plymouth. By about 1842, she relocated with several of her younger children to Orleans County, New York, suggesting the presence of extended family or community support.

In the 1850 census, Catherine appears in Gaines, Orleans County, living with Phineas Rowley, likely as a boarder or housekeeper, with her youngest son, Daniel. Rowley's death in 1851 ended this arrangement. During this period, Catherine's older children were establishing households of their own, primarily in Michigan.

Final Marriage and Later Years

Catherine returned to Michigan, and on 29 March 1857, at nearly sixty years of age, she married Zenas (Zenos) C. Speer in Ingham County. Both were residents of Phelpstown (now Williamstown), and Catherine's daughter, Jane, served as a witness. In the 1860 census, Catherine was living with Zenas and one of his sons, with Jane's household nearby.

Zenas Speer died sometime between 1860 and 1865, leaving Catherine widowed for the third time. By 1865, she moved to Burlington, Kane County, Illinois, to live near her daughters, Lydia Helen (Lott) Hardy and Jane Catherine (Lott) Kesler. In the 1870 census, Catherine was living in the household of Philip Kesler, her son-in-law's father, where she was listed as "keeping house."

Catherine has not been conclusively identified in the 1880 census. A secondary source states that she died on 26 January 1891, probably in Plymouth, Wayne County, Michigan, but no death certificate, obituary, or burial record has been located to confirm this claim. Her burial place remains unknown.

The Necessity of Marriage in Catherine Johnson's Life

Catherine Johnson's repeated marriages were not unusual for her time but rather reflect the economic realities faced by women in the early nineteenth century. Widowed women rarely had the legal standing, financial resources, or employment opportunities necessary to support themselves and their children. Property laws overwhelmingly favored men, wages for women were minimal and inconsistent, and social expectations discouraged female autonomy outside of marriage or family households. For a woman like Catherine—responsible for young children and living on the margins of frontier society—remaining unmarried was not a viable option.

Throughout her life, Catherine adapted repeatedly to loss, migration, and hardship. Her movements—from New Jersey to New York, Michigan, back to New York, then Illinois, and finally Michigan again—trace not instability, but resilience. Marriage, widowhood, and remarriage were not defining traits of her character; rather, they were the tools through which she navigated a world that offered women few alternatives. Catherine Johnson's life illustrates how necessity, rather than choice, shaped the paths of many nineteenth-century women, and how endurance and adaptability were essential to survival.