

# Madame Restell's Family Origins

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**M**adame Restell was a “necessary evil” some said. A high-profile personality in nineteenth-century New York society, she catered to the city’s wealthy businessmen, bankers, and politicians, who paid well for her services and discretion. But who was Madame Restell before she became New York City’s infamous abortionist, the woman who amassed so much wealth from her trade that she could build a mansion on Fifth Avenue?

The details of Madame Restell’s early life have been cloaked in misinformation and unsubstantiated lore. To this day, what’s recycled about her seems to have come primarily from two sources: her lengthy obituary, “End of a Criminal Life,” in *The New York Times*, April 2, 1878, and a 1988 biography by Clifford Browder, *The Wickedest Woman in New York: Madame Restell, the Abortionist*. Overall this biography is probably the best source on Madame Restell’s life in America, but Browder left loose ends about her birth family.

These two sources give Madame Restell’s birth name as Ann Trow, and her tombstone in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, Sleepy Hollow, New York, records her birth date as May 6, 1811. The will of her second husband, Charles Lohman, names her father: “John Trow of Painswick, England.” Census enumerations in 1850, 1860, and 1870, show a younger brother, Joseph Trow, living in her household. Ann was presumed to be born in Painswick, probably because this is where her father resided. She had married in “Witshire” a man named Henry Summers (or Somers), and together they had a daughter named Caroline in 1830. They departed for America shortly thereafter. But the anonymous reporter who wrote her obituary, and her biographer, were not professional genealogists, as I am, so I decided to apply my skills to solve the mystery of Madame Restell’s true identity.

In her first advertisement in the *New York Sun* in 1839, she claimed she had learned midwifery from her grandmother, Mrs. Restell. There’s only one problem. She had no grandmother named Restell. Where did this name originate?

Genealogists use two important strategies when researching ancestors who left few, if any, records of their early lives, as Ann did. First, instead of only researching backward in time, we sometimes have to come forward, looking for records long after an individual’s death. When Ann died in 1878, her total estate was valued at around \$1,056,000 (some \$25.1 million in today’s currency). Her estate wasn’t completely settled until 1922, forty-four years after her demise. The resulting records, which others appear to have overlooked, were instrumental in learning about another brother’s identity and whereabouts.

Second, genealogists search for records of the siblings, children, and grandchildren. These relatives might have left information about the family and its origins that the person in question did not. Ann had two brothers who followed her to America, and they became the key I needed to unlock her origins and family in England.

Court records show that Ann's brother Joseph Trow filed a suit against her estate in New York City's Court of Common Pleas the year after she died. Ann had withheld money Joseph was bequeathed in her second husband's will. She didn't approve of Joseph's marriage and had no intention of his wife's family getting any of the money. Instead, she sold the bonds Charles Lohman had left Joseph.

Family squabbles aside, the court case revealed another brother. Phoebe Perry, who testified on Joseph's behalf, claimed she had known Ann for forty years: "I knew her before she was Mrs. Lohman." Phoebe had stayed in contact with Ann, except for the last two or three years of Ann's life. Phoebe testified that when she visited Ann in 1871, Ann had "received a letter from her brother Stephen, and she seemed to be quite put out about it, because he wanted her to repair his barn."

Frederick Henry Ponton testified that he, too, had visited Ann that year, and "she talked to me about her brother Joe; she said she had provided for her sisters in England, and had given them a house apiece; that she had provided for her brother out West, and had given him a farm."

In this case, "out West" referred to western New York. Ann's estate papers listed property in Orleans County, New York, and that's where I found her brother, Stephen Trow.

Now that I had a sibling group of Ann, Joseph, and Stephen, along with their approximate birth years from U.S. census records, and knew their father's name was John Trow who resided in Painswick, Gloucestershire, I was able to locate Ann's birth family in English records. Lest you think it was easy, I first had to differentiate several men named John Trow and several daughters born with the name Ann, but only one family grouping matched. In the Bishop's Transcripts for Stroud, which neighbors Painswick, there were baptisms for the right time frame for Ann, Joseph, and Stephen, all children of a John Trow. Plus there were five other brothers: William, James, Thomas, John, and Edwin. There were no baptisms recorded for any sisters, though. Ann may have been boasting to make herself look magnanimous, when in fact, she had no sisters, or perhaps she referred to sisters-in-law as "sisters."

Ann was baptized on June 9, 1811, the daughter of John and Anne (Biddle) Trow. Although the record did not give her birthplace, the censuses for the brothers who remained in England report that they were all born in Painswick. It is likely Ann was, too.

I next found the record of Ann's first marriage to Henry Summers, a tailor. They were married on March 26, 1829, in Wootton Bassett, Wiltshire, England. If Ann was born in May 1811, as her tombstone showed, she would turn eighteen in less than two months. Ann and Henry had one child, who was christened Caroline on February 21, 1830, also in Wootton Bassett. The family immigrated to America sometime between Caroline's birth in early 1830 and Henry's death in New York City in August 1831, even though no passenger list appears to have survived.

Ann's father, John Trow, I discovered, was baptized on February 18, 1776, in Wootton Bassett. Ann's obituary stated that her father was "poor and ignorant," and Browder claimed he worked in a woolen mill, but English censuses consistently show that John worked as an agricultural laborer. If being an agricultural laborer is an indication that he was "poor and ignorant," then that describes most people's ancestors, as almost all of us can claim agricultural workers in our family history.

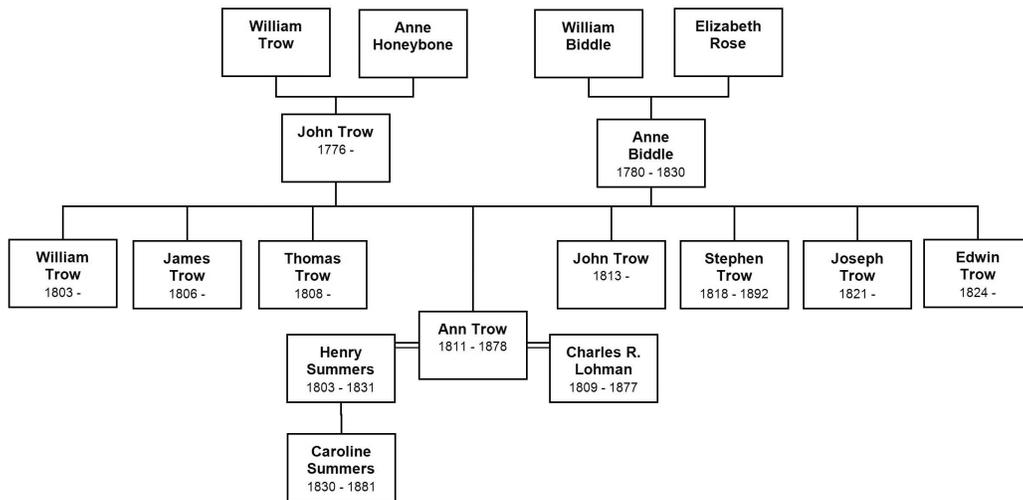
Browder had claimed that "When about fifteen [Ann] was sent out to service, becoming a maid in a butcher's family..." Possibly she was sent to work for a family in Wootton Bassett, but it seems more likely she boarded with Trow relatives. This would

explain how she met (and married) someone from Wootton Bassett. Three of Ann's paternal uncles resided there, but none were butchers. Thomas Trow was a coal merchant, William Trow an agricultural laborer, and Stephen Trow a shopkeeper.

Further examination of parish baptisms and marriages revealed that Ann's paternal grandparents were William and Anne (Honeybone) Trow, and her maternal grandparents were William and Elizabeth (Rose) Biddle.

There was no grandmother Restell.

**Family of Ann (Trow) (Summers) Lohman a.k.a. Madame Restell**



It is odd, then, that when Ann's brother Joseph provided personal information for his Manhattan marriage license in 1872, he said his parents' names were John Trow and Ann *Russell*. Said with an English accent, Restell might be heard and recorded by the clerk as Russell. It's more likely he did not know his mother's maiden name. Anne (Biddle) Trow died in 1830 when Joseph was nine. He lived in a time when mothers' maiden names were not asked as security questions. This marriage license was probably the only document created during his lifetime where he would have been asked her maiden name. Given some forty years since and another country distant, Joseph probably muttered the first thing that popped into his mind: the surname his sister used.

Restell/Restall was a rare surname in the early 1800s. Although I found the name in Stroud, there were none in Painswick or Wootton Bassett. Likewise, based on U.S. city directory listings and censuses, the name Restell was uncommon in New York City during Ann's day. In the 1830 U.S. census for New York City, there were no Restells or name variants recorded. In 1840, there was only one head of household listed in New York City with the surname Restell, a man named Patrick.

To complicate things further, Ann also styled herself "Caroline Restell" in Manhattan city directories. In Stroud, there was at least one woman named Caroline Restall who was baptized in 1824, but she was thirteen years younger than Ann, and it's not likely the two ever met. Neither Caroline nor Restell appear to be family names—just ones Ann must have liked.

Although I've tracked down Madame Restell's family origins, the mystery of her alias went with Ann to the grave. She adopted an uncommon name, one that would stay in people's minds and set herself apart from her competitors. She couldn't have known that the name Restell would become so notorious that people nearly two centuries later would still remember it.

**Sources:**

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Wootton Bassett Parish Registers, Wiltshire, England, Baptisms

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