

HISTORICAL RESEARCH REPORT

Mattie Mosby Before the Iron Queen

*Recovering the Cincinnati family and river career of a Black steamboat
chambermaid*

c. 1854 - April 3, 1895

**Best current conclusion: Mattie was an experienced river worker, a widow and mother,
and a woman who helped passengers escape before she was lost.**

Researched, conceived, directed, and edited by T.P. Calhoun

Research completed September 7, 2026

Executive finding

Mattie Mosby was not merely an unnamed domestic worker who happened to be aboard the *Iron Queen*. The available evidence points to an experienced Ohio River chambermaid with a career on several packets and a settled family life in Cincinnati. The best contemporary description calls her a widowed Black woman “about 40 years old,” placing her birth around **1854-1855**. At the time of her death, she lived at **271½ East Sixth Street** with or near an aged mother, a brother, a sister, and two sons. A Cincinnati account names the brother as **James Mosby**.

Her pre-disaster work history is beginning to emerge. A Cincinnati report says she had served on the *Big Kanawha* before the *Iron Queen*. A later river-history account adds that she had been chambermaid on the Pittsburgh-Cincinnati packet *Katie Stockdale* “and boats before that.” Because the *Katie Stockdale* was dismantled in 1890, that recollection - if accurate - places Mattie in river service by 1890 at the latest, and probably earlier.

The most important correction to the familiar story concerns her last actions. The celebrated line about refusing to be seen without her hat appears in a 1964 retelling, not in the surviving 1895 coverage. A contemporary syndicated report says she repeatedly helped women passengers ashore and then returned once too often in search of property. A named passenger, Miss Greene, said Mattie could have saved herself but went

back for her clothes. The safest historical conclusion is therefore also the strongest:

Mattie helped passengers reach safety, returned for clothing or property, became trapped by smoke and flame, jumped into the river, and drowned.

Her maiden name, husband’s name, mother’s name, sister’s name, son’s name, birthplace, and burial place remain unproved.

What can now be said with confidence

Identity and age

The Cincinnati *Enquirer* described Mattie as a “colored woman about 40 years old, and a widow” and gave her home as 271½ East Sixth Street. “About 40” in April 1895 suggests a birth around 1854-1855, but this is an estimate rather than a recorded birth date. Later reports sometimes call her Martha, but Mattie was also a legal given name in the nineteenth century; the two forms should be searched independently.

The widowhood report is important. It means Mosby could be a married surname, but the newspaper’s reference to “the brother, James Mosby” raises the possibility that Mosby was also her birth surname. Reporters sometimes gave a sibling a woman’s surname for convenience, so neither interpretation is proved.

Cincinnati household

The *Enquirer* placed an aged mother, a brother, a sister, and Mattie's two sons at or connected with her Cincinnati home. That is unusually rich family information for a working Black woman in an 1895 disaster story, but only James Mosby was named in the legible text.

The address creates a complication rather than a contradiction. Cincinnati directories around 1894-1895 list Black laundresses Martha and Lovie Lewis and laborer Thomas Lewis at 271 East Sixth Street, while Mattie's newspaper address was the half-number 271½. This could mean separate units in the same building, a shared or subdivided house, informal boarding, or a directory omission caused by her river work. There is not enough evidence to identify the Lewises as Mattie's relatives.

Occupation before 1895

Mattie's occupation required trust, stamina, and constant travel. A chambermaid cleaned and prepared passenger cabins, tended bedding and linens, and assisted women traveling aboard a packet. Period evidence shows that chambermaids formed a very small part of a much larger crew. The 1880 federal transportation report's model 500-ton Ohio River passenger-and-freight steamer employed roughly seventy officers and crew, including ten cabin workers, two cooks, two chambermaids, and thirty roustabouts. The two chambermaids together earned about \$30 a month - roughly \$15 each. This is an

industry benchmark, not the *Iron Queen's* exact roster.

Black workers were central to steamboat service. Regional histories document Black men working as cooks, waiters, porters, stewards, deckhands, and roustabouts, and Black women working as maids and cooks. Mattie's career therefore fits a recognizable labor system, even though individual Black women are often difficult to trace in crew lists and censuses.

Reconstructed pre-1895 work timeline

Before 1890 - earlier boats, names unknown. A 1964 S&D *Reflector* account states that Mattie was chambermaid on the *Katie Stockdale* "and boats before that." This is a late recollection and must be treated cautiously, but it preserves a specific employment tradition.

By 1890 at the latest - Katie Stockdale. The *Katie Stockdale*, built in 1877, operated as a Pittsburgh-Cincinnati packet and was dismantled at Harmar in 1890. If the retrospective identification is correct, Mattie already had an established river career by then. Captain Thomas S. Calhoon was associated with both the *Katie Stockdale* and, later, the *Iron Queen*, suggesting a plausible employment network. It does not prove that he personally hired her.

After 1887 and before 1895 - Big Kanawha. The Cincinnati account says Mattie worked on the *Big Kanawha* before joining the *Iron*

Queen. Built in 1887, that packet served Pomeroy, Gallipolis, Charleston, and Coal Valley. This would have made Mattie familiar with the same Ohio River corridor in which she later died.

Before April 1895 - Iron Queen. Mattie served as chambermaid on the Pittsburgh-based *Iron Queen*, a packet built in 1892. The available evidence does not establish her hiring date.

The rescue account and the hat story

The earliest reports are more valuable than the later legend. A syndicated article published three days after the fire stated that Mattie “time and again helped lady passengers ashore” and finally returned once too often for property. The wording presents her death as “a sacrifice for the safety of others.” The report misspelled her surname in at least one printing, but the details, role, and event identify her.

The *Wheeling Register* attributed another account to passenger Miss Greene: Mattie “could have saved herself very easily had she not gone back after her clothes.” Smoke and flame then cut off the cabin exit.

The precise hat anecdote appears in the September 1964 *S&D Reflector*: after reaching shore, Mattie supposedly exclaimed, “Me with no hat on!” and returned to the boat. That vivid line may preserve river oral tradition, but it cannot presently be traced to 1895 testimony. It should be quoted as a later

remembrance, not as a verified verbatim statement.

This distinction makes Mattie’s story more human, not less. A hat could represent dignity, respectability, and public presentation for a Black working woman traveling by train home to Cincinnati. But the contemporary record gives her an additional and firmer claim to remembrance: before returning for her belongings, she had been helping other women escape.

Census and family research

Why the census is difficult

Steamboat workers could be recorded at a family residence, aboard a vessel, in a boardinghouse, or missed entirely. Women employed seasonally or continuously on packets might not appear in city directories. Name variation, handwriting, racial indexing practices, remarriage, and the loss of the 1890 federal census create further gaps.

The Ohio 1880 Soundex was checked in the M210 sequence. No Martha or Mattie Mosby card appeared in the relevant given-name sequence, and no James Mosby card appeared in the James sequence. This is a limited negative result: Ohio’s 1880 Soundex indexed only households containing a child age ten or younger. Mattie could easily have been present in the census but outside the indexed household category.

The James and Malinda Mosby possibility

Cincinnati records reveal a prominent Black Mosby couple whose chronology makes them worth keeping on the research board:

- James Mosby, a laborer and later janitor/waiter in city directories, died November 10, 1885, age seventy-one, at 70 Hunt Street. His death record describes him as Black, married, Virginia-born, and buried in the Colored American Cemetery.
- Malinda Mosby, widow of James A. Mosby, died March 14, 1901, age sixty-one. Her record describes her as Black, Maryland-born, and a domestic; she was also buried in the Colored American Cemetery.
- In an 1874 African Methodist Episcopal benevolent-society report, Malinda Mosby served as president of the United Sisters and James A. Mosby as Grand Commander of the Independent Order of United Brethren.

These records show an established Black Mosby family with river-service-adjacent occupations and community standing. They do **not** yet prove that either person was Mattie's parent or relative. Malinda would have been about fifty-five in 1895, which sits uneasily with the newspaper's phrase "aged mother," although nineteenth-century usage was flexible. James died a decade before the disaster and therefore cannot be the brother James mentioned in 1895 if that brother was living.

A stronger directory cluster

The directories distinguish that older James from a second man of the same name: **James Mosby, head waiter at the Dennison Hotel in 1888**. Because he survived the older James and worked in passenger service, he is presently the best candidate for Mattie's brother James, but the identification remains unproved.

Several other Black Cincinnati Mosbys form a suggestive neighborhood and service-work cluster:

- **Julia Mosby**, a laundress, lived at 63 East Eighth in 1887-1888, on Whetstone Alley in 1891-1894, and at the rear of 70 Hunt in 1895 - the older James Mosby's former address. She is the strongest current candidate for Mattie's unnamed sister.
- **Curtis Mosby**, a peddler, lived at 92 East Sixth in 1884 and rear 84 East Sixth in 1887 and 1889. His address places him in Mattie's immediate East Sixth corridor.
- **Marshall Mosby**, a waiter, appears from 1885 through 1895 at a series of rooming addresses. His occupation fits the same hospitality network as Mattie and James the head waiter.
- **Matthew Mosby**, a laborer, lived at 28 Broadway in 1892 and 99 East Sixth in 1893.

Curtis, Marshall, or Matthew could be one of the two sons mentioned in the newspaper, or they could be unrelated adults. Ages and

direct kinship evidence are still missing. Taken together, however, James the hotel head waiter, Julia the laundress, and the East Sixth men form a substantially better working family cluster than the much older Virginia Martha Mosby candidate.

Marshall Mosby and Lucy Grimes

The official Hamilton County marriage index led to the original license for **Marshall Mosby and Lucy Grimes**, issued May 14, 1886, with a marriage return dated May 15. Both were Hamilton County residents and of legal age. Cincinnati directories describe a Marshall Mosby as a waiter, making him part of the same broad Black service-work milieu as Mattie. No document currently connects Marshall or Lucy to her.

What was ruled out

An Ancestry result for a Virginia free Black woman named Martha Mosby, age twenty-three and born about 1834, is too old to match the Cincinnati newspaper's "about 40" description in 1895. A possible Martha Mosby in 1867 Staunton Freedmen's Bureau material is likewise unproved and probably belongs to an older woman. Neither should be attached to Mattie without new evidence.

No Mattie or Martha Mosby marriage was found in the official Hamilton County M-surname indexes for 1863-1898. That does not rule out a marriage elsewhere, a misspelling, an unindexed record, or Mosby as a birth surname.

Evidence matrix

Finding	Best evidence	Assessment
Black chambermaid from Cincinnati	Contemporary Cincinnati and Wheeling newspaper reports	Confirmed
Widow, about forty	Cincinnati <i>Enquirer</i> , April 4, 1895	Strong; birth c.1854–1855 is an estimate
Home at 271½ East Sixth Street	Cincinnati <i>Enquirer</i> , April 4, 1895	Confirmed as reported
Aged mother, brother, sister, and two sons in Cincinnati	Cincinnati <i>Enquirer</i> , April 4, 1895	Strong; only brother James is legible by name
Worked on the <i>Big Kanawha</i>	Cincinnati <i>Enquirer</i> , April 4, 1895	Strong contemporary biographical claim
Worked on the <i>Katie Stockdale</i> and earlier boats	<i>S&D Reflector</i> , September 1964	Valuable but retrospective; medium confidence
River career began by 1890	Inference from <i>Katie Stockdale</i> dismantling date	Probable if the 1964 identification is accurate
Helped women passengers ashore	Syndicated report, April 4–6, 1895	Strong near-contemporary evidence
Returned for clothes/property, was trapped, jumped, drowned	Miss Greene’s account and syndicated report	Strong core sequence
Said “Me with no hat on!”	<i>S&D Reflector</i> , September 1964	Later tradition; not verified in 1895 reporting

Finding	Best evidence	Assessment
Mosby was her maiden name	Brother reported as James Mosby	Possible, not proved
James and Malinda Mosby were family	Cincinnati directory, death, and society records	Research lead only
Hotel waiter James, Julia, Curtis, Marshall, or Matthew were kin	Cincinnati directories, 1884-1895	Best working cluster, but no direct kinship proof
Burial in Colored American Cemetery	No direct Mattie record found	Unknown; do not infer from other Mosbys

Best next archival targets

1. Meigs County death register, 1867-1897, volume 1.

The digitized volume exists, but online image access was blocked during this search. The Meigs County Probate Court or Meigs County Historical Society can inspect the April 1895 entries directly. A record may give age, marital status, residence, birthplace, or cause of death.

2. Hamilton County undertaker and burial records.

Because the body was shipped home on April 8-9, 1895, undertaker ledgers and the Colored American Cemetery/Cemeteries of Cincinnati records are likely more promising than another broad name search.

3. Crew and business papers for Capt. Thomas S. Calhoun and the Pittsburgh-Cincinnati packet line.

Payrolls, wharfboat accounts, or crew books for the *Katie Stockdale*, *Big Kanawha*, and *Iron Queen* could establish dates of service and wages.

4. Full household search in the 1880 census.

Search original Hamilton County schedules - not only Soundex - for every Mosby household and for first-name-only Black women named Mattie or Martha born about 1850-1860, especially with sons or brothers named James.

5. Cincinnati Black churches and benevolent societies.

The Mosby family's documented AME involvement makes church minutes, burial registers, women's societies, and lodge records plausible sources for kinship and funeral information.

Conclusion

The evidence still withholds Mattie's maiden name and the names of most of her family, but it now restores more of her life before the fire. She was about forty, widowed, a mother of two and a daughter within a Cincinnati household, and an experienced chambermaid whose work likely carried her

for years between Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Pomeroy, and the Kanawha Valley. The record also shows that someone did care enough to send her body home - and that contemporary reporters preserved the fact that she had been helping women passengers before she was lost.

The surviving sources do not justify turning every Mosby in Cincinnati into her relative. They do justify treating Mattie as a skilled river worker with a professional history, a family, and a reputation for conscientious service. The task ahead is no longer to prove that she existed; it is to recover the names of the people who were waiting for her at 271½ East Sixth Street.

Sources

1. Cincinnati *Enquirer*, April 4 and April 9, 1895, p. 4, user-provided newspaper images.
2. *Wheeling Register*, April 4, 1895, p. 6, [Open source](#)
3. *True Republican* (Sycamore, Illinois), April 6, 1895, syndicated account, [Open source](#)
4. *Wheeling Register*, April 11, 1895, p. 5, Library of Congress, [Open source](#)
5. "The Iron Queen's Story," *S&D Reflector*, September 1964, p. 5, [Open source](#)
6. University of Wisconsin-Madison, *Iron Queen* packet record, [Open source](#)
7. University of Wisconsin-Madison, *Katie Stockdale* packet record, [Open source](#)
8. University of Wisconsin-Madison, *Big Kanawha* packet record, [Open source](#)
9. U.S. Census Office, *Report on the Agencies of Transportation in the United States* (1880), Ohio River steamer labor table, [Open source](#)
10. Hamilton County Probate Court, marriage archive and M indexes, marriage license vol. 98, p. 387, [Open source](#)
11. University of Cincinnati Digital Resource Commons, James Mosby death registration, [Open source](#)
12. University of Cincinnati Digital Resource Commons, Malinda Mosby death registration, [Open source](#)
13. "Minutes and By-Laws of the African Methodist Episcopal Church Benevolent Societies" (1874), National Humanities Center, [Open source](#)
14. Meigs County genealogical references, Meigs County Historical Society/Ohio GenWeb, [Open source](#)

15. National Archives, 1880 Census Soundex microfilm catalog, Ohio reel T767-79, [Open source](#)
16. Walnut Hills Historical Society, "Occupations - Steamboats," , [Open source](#)
17. Howard Steamboat Museum, Black history and river labor, [Open source](#)
18. Cincinnati city directories, 1884-1895, Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County Digital Library; representative 1888 Mosby page, [Open source](#)

Research cautions

- Cincinnati death registrations before 1908 are incomplete; absence from the surviving index is not proof that no registration existed.
- The 1890 federal population census is largely lost.
- The 1880 Ohio Soundex negative applies only to the special index's household coverage, not to every person enumerated in Ohio.
- The *S&D Reflector* details are useful river history but were published sixty-nine years after the disaster.