

# FAMILIES

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**William A. Barnes working in the barbershop he owned in Cayuga, Haldimand County  
(Courtesy of the Haldimand Museum and Archives).**

See Jean Farquharson's article within to learn more about the history of  
Black settlers along the Grand River.

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# Ontario County Johnston Y-DNA Project

W. Wesley Johnston

**W. Wesley Johnston** inherited the Pickering Township Thomas Johnston Family Bible in 1954 and has been searching out his ancestors and cousins ever since. He holds Master's degrees in Mathematics and History. He has published numerous articles, and has done on-site family research in Canada, the United States, Germany, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, Cornwall, Scotland, England, and Ireland. He is the administrator of the Johnstons of North Ireland Y-DNA Project. His book, *Family Thickets: Deep Family and Local History*, shares his experience from more than a dozen family thicket projects in six countries. His books, *Researcher's Guide to Pre-Fire Records of Chicago and Cook County*, and *The Graphic Work of Berthe Morisot: A Collector's Guide and Catalogue Raisonné*, are the definitive works on the subjects. He is the Historian of the U.S. 7th Armored Division Association and Founding President of the American World War II Association Historians Consortium, and has done research for over a dozen new monuments in Europe since 1994. His website is [www.wjohnston.net/famhist](http://www.wjohnston.net/famhist).

**Keyword Surnames:** Johnston

**Keyword Places:** Ontario County, Pickering Township, Reach Township, Brock Township.

## Abstract

Old Ontario County became the home of many Johnston families. Some of them lived very close to each other. Most came from Ireland, specifically the northern counties. But were they related? The fact that the Public Record Office in Dublin was destroyed in the 1922 Irish Civil War meant that most of the paper records no longer existed to answer the question. As part of the Johnstons of North Ireland Y-DNA Project, we have obtained Big Y-700 DNA tests for descendants of some of these Ontario County Johnston families. We can now begin to see which ones are more closely related to each other. Surprisingly, all of them thus far tested trace back to an ancestor estimated from the Y-DNA results to have been born about 1600, although we have yet to connect any of the five families with paper records.

## The Origins of the Johnstons of North Ireland Y-DNA Project

I descend from Thomas Johnston who settled in Pickering Township in Ontario County by the mid-1840s. His age on the census puts his birth in Ireland about 1801. Nothing is known of him before his time in Pickering Township. The destruction of the Public Record Office in Dublin, Ireland, in the 1922 Irish Civil War took with it most of the records of families in Ireland. Some records survive, but no records of Thomas were found by a hired researcher in about 1995. So, like many others researching families from Ireland, once Y-DNA testing became available, I provided my DNA in 2009 to see what it could reveal.

Many years went by before I was contacted by Clifford Johnston, born in Prescott County, Ontario, but now living in Texas. He had set up a project for a specific group of Johnstons whose Y-DNA haplogroup members traced back to the area near Lockerbie, Scotland. He eventually set up the Johnstons of

The screenshot shows the FamilyTreeDNA website for the 'Johnstons of North Ireland' project. The page features a dark header with the project name and a 'JOIN' button. Below the header, there is a navigation menu with options like 'About', 'DNA Results', 'Surnames', 'Photos', 'Links', 'Administrators', and 'Co-Administrators'. The main content area displays a list of Y-DNA testing options, including 'Classic Chart', 'Colorized Chart', 'Map', 'SNPs', and 'Group Time Tree'. Each option is accompanied by a brief description of the results it provides.

Left: The Johnstons of North Ireland Y-DNA Project website, <https://www.familytreedna.com/groups/north-ireland-johnstons/about>.

Annandale Y-DNA Project. I learned a great deal from him about working with test takers in a project. And ultimately, I realized that we also needed a project for the Johnstons of North Ireland. So, I set up the project in 2018. The project has 115 members as of this writing.

By 2020, we had an active group of us researching these Johnston families, and we decided to set up an e-mail group. The e-mail activity comes in spurts, with periods of very intense activity on one or more families as the flow and periods of little activity as the ebb.

### The Origins of the Ontario County Johnstons Y-DNA Project

Of course, my personal interest was my Thomas Johnston. I had no idea where in the north of Ireland he was from. And while my DNA placed me within a large and growing group of us who all connect somehow back about 1600, I had no matches close enough to connect my Thomas Johnston with anyone else.

I found myself researching all the Johnstons who lived in Pickering Township and then all those who lived in the entire Ontario County. I traced back in time but found no way to know if some Thomas Johnston in some record was or was not my Thomas Johnston. I also traced forward in time to see if I could identify other Johnstons of Ontario County who could do a Y-DNA test.

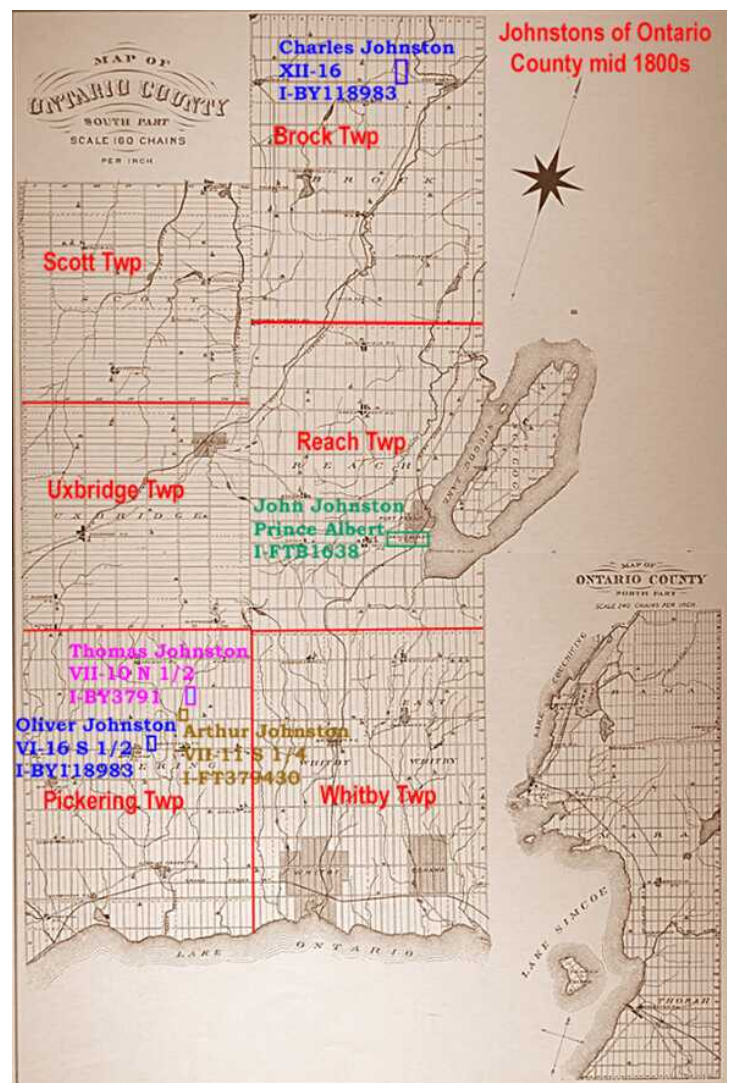
Once I started the Johnstons of North Ireland Y-DNA Project, descendants of some of these families joined the project. In one case, our research group found two descendants of the Johnston family in Pickering Township that was about 6 miles away from where my Thomas Johnston lived. At long last, after many decades of inconclusive search in the surviving paper records, I was able to find out whether these Johnstons might be near cousins of mine. Unfortunately, they were not. But they were cousins with that common ancestor back in about the year 1600.

We had five different Ontario County Johnston families whose descendants had done the Family Tree

DNA Big Y-700 test. (Family Tree DNA is the only testing company that does full Y-DNA testing.) It was time to put these together into a project within the Johnstons of North Ireland project.

### Putting the Families on the Map

The first step was to find out precisely where each family lived in Ontario County and plot them on the county map. The McGill University “Canadian County Atlas Digital Project” was the place to go for the county map. It is from the 1877 “Illustrated Historical Atlas of the County of Ontario, Ont.” published in Toronto by J. H. Beers and Company. And here is how this first group of Johnston families looks.

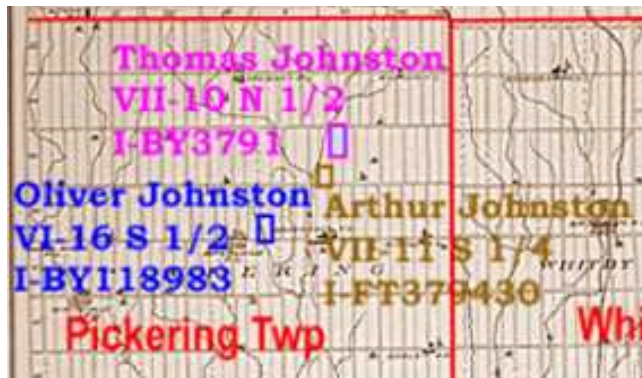


Above: Johnstons of Ontario County from 1877 Atlas.

These are not the only Johnston families of the county. These are the ones whose direct male-line descendants have thus far done the Big Y-700 test that allows us to tell the families have the same or different mutations in their Y-DNA.

The families are coloured differently because they belong to different branches of the Y-DNA Haplotree – the tree of all Y-DNA branches back to Y-DNA Adam. One thing that is quickly apparent is that we have the same haplogroup in the two blue families, even though one settled in Pickering Township, and one settled further north in Brock Township.

Zooming in on the three families in Pickering Township, we can see they are all different haplogroups.



So, just because all three families came from the north of Ireland and settled very near each other in Pickering Township does not mean that they were closely related.

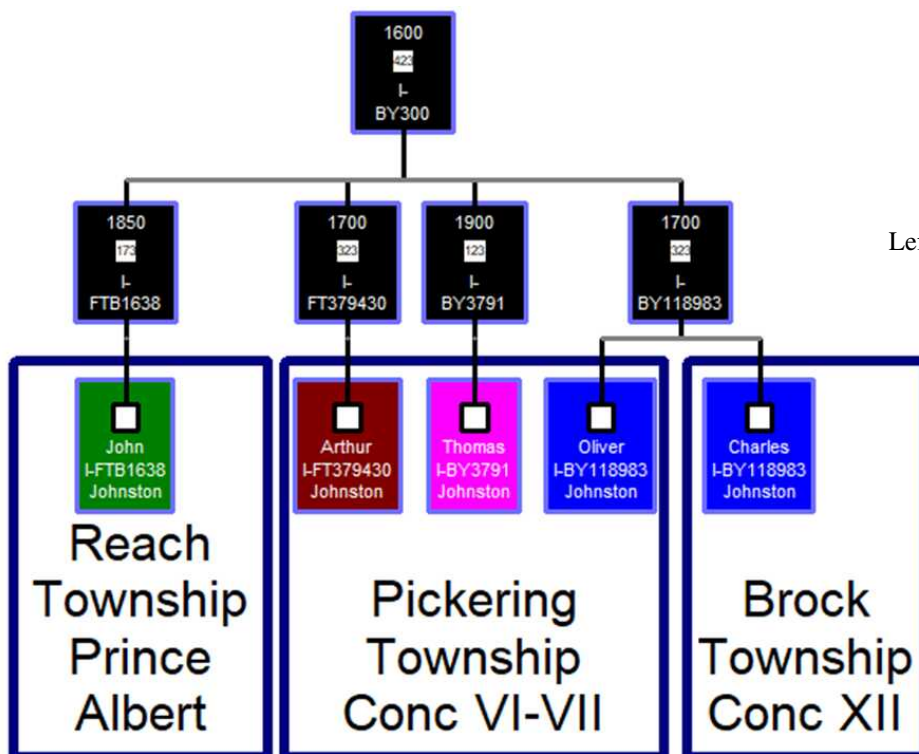
### Visualizing the Relationships

Just how were these families related? The fact that they were all in major haplogroup I, in fact all in high-level

haplogroup I-M223, already told us a lot. Our Johnstons of North Ireland DNA testers fell into two high-level haplogroups: I-M223 and R-M269. Clifford Johnston had recognized in his Johnstons of Annandale project that the I-M223 haplogroup came from the area of Scotland along the River Annan. So, the fact that all of those thus far tested Ontario County Johnstons are I-M223 does mean they were at least distantly related to each other.

However, telling someone that you are in haplogroup I-M223 is about the same as telling them that your postal address is North America. I-M223 is a very old haplogroup from which many branches have since split. Family Tree DNA estimates that the most recent common ancestor of I-M223 was born about 17,000 years ago! This is why we needed the Big Y-700 tests to give us the most precise lowest level placement of each family in the Y-Haplotree.

Family Tree DNA's Discover tool (<https://discover.familytreedna.com>) provides estimates of when a branch split off and when the most recent common ancestor (MRCA) of that branch lived. Using the MRCA estimated birth years (which are roughly to the closest 50 years), here is how the Ontario County Johnston families are estimated to connect with each other.



Left: Y-Haplotree of the Ontario County Johnston Families.

So, all these families have the I-BY300 mutation. They also have the specific additional mutation for their branch that no other branch has.

FTDNA estimates I-BY300's MRCA's birth about the year 1600. FTDNA estimates that I-BY300 formed when it branched off of its "parent" branch about the year 1450.

Two of the subgroups (technically called sub-clades) of I-BY300 in Ontario County have MRCAs estimated with birth about 1700. In both cases, FTDNA estimates these mutations formed about the year 1600. So, it may be that two of the sons of the ancestor born about 1600 each had separate mutations that formed these Johnston branches.

The other two subgroups date to 1850 and 1900. That means that their ancestors anywhere from 1600 to 1850 or 1900 may have still been I-BY300, but somewhere in that time period a father had a son who had this new mutation to form this new branch of the tree. So, these branches retained the original I-BY300 mutation as their only defining mutation longer than the other branches.

The most interesting pair are the blue I-BY118983 families – one that settled in Pickering Township and one in Brock Township. While their branch had formed by about 1700, no other testers have been found to

indicate that there has been a mutation since then.

However, FTDNA's Discover tool (<https://discover.familytreedna.com/y-dna/I-BY118983/story>) notes that this 1700-born ancestor "is the ancestor of at least 4 descendant lineages known as I-BY61704 and 3 yet unnamed lineages." And we do have two testers who are positive not only for I-BY118983 but also for I-BY61704. So, not only is there the possibility of connecting these two Ontario County Johnston lines but also two additional DNA-tested lines.

### What Next?

For the Ontario County Johnstons, we need to do "target testing" by finding living descendants of the other Ontario County Johnston families so that we can put them on the map and in the chart.

Since we have many testers in the Johnstons of North Ireland project whose ancestors came to Canada, we also will be looking at other counties. Dundas County seems the next likely place to do this kind of analysis since we have one Dundas County Johnston test done and two pending as of this writing.

We will also make a chart for all the I-BY300 testers to show both how they connect and when but also to show where they lived.

So, there is much more work ahead.

