

In Search of Old Homesteads

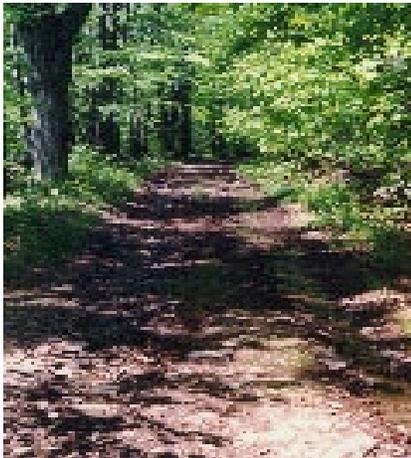
by Joyce Riedinger - 1990

Relationship of Families In Story:
James Wiltse m. Thankful Deyo
their daughter Jemima Wiltse m. Nicholas J. Sigsbee
their daughter Salina Sigsbee m. Hiram Persons (Joyce's great-grandparents)

Place: Little Westkill Hills, out of Prattsville, NY, Greene County

Opening a box drawer in the basement of an old County Clerk's Building and carefully unfolding a yellowed, brittle copy of a will that probably hasn't been opened in a hundred and seventy-five years, can be very exciting when it proves that "the person" is indeed the parent of an ancestor you are currently tracing. However, when nothing new is discovered after a full day's work in one of these windowless dungeons, thoughts of fresh air and sunshine quickly change the course of ones research.

After looking over old deeds, mortgages and wills on several occasions during my last research spree, I decided one day that I had enough of that. The following weekend, my husband Tar and I took to the hills, the "Little Westkill Hills" that is. It was Spring's first real gem of a day, sunshine abounding, with all the peace and quiet that the Little Westkill area always seems to exude.



Our major mission was to find the old homestead of Hiram and Salina Persons. We knew that only an old foundation now remained, and that we were supposed to turn by the old schoolhouse and head out the road a quarter of a mile or so. However, on prior trips out that way, we could not even find the schoolhouse. This time with the aid of an old map, we were confident we would be successful. So with great expectations, we slowly drove the three or four miles up the hill out of Prattsville. After reaching the top, the only possible road to the right appeared. We saw what we believed was the site that the old schoolhouse had sat upon. The road turning to the right however was not exactly inviting. After going perhaps a hundred yards, a bottomless looking waterhole in the middle of the road stopped us. We weren't sure that this was a public road. We weren't even sure this was a road. Once again we were foiled. This time however, we took note of the name and address of property owners posted at the edge of the road going in.

Since we had failed again on this mission, we decided to go on down to the cemetery where Nicholas Sigsbee and wife Jemima are buried. While standing beside Nicholas and Jemima, we checked the old map again. This time, we looked across the valley to an old white house that seemed to be the old "Wiltse" farm. Again, as we tried to reach it, we were stopped by various barriers. So once again, we took note of the name and address of the property owner.

Meeting failure for the second time that day, we started to drive back down Little Westkill Road. With the map still in hand, I glanced out the car window at a road heading to the right and just up ahead of us saw a house and barn sitting back in a most beautiful spot just where N. Sigsbee's place was indicated on the map. This time, we had hit the jackpot.

This was Nicholas J. Sigsbee's place. Getting out my notepad, another name and address was added from the mailbox leading up the long driveway to Nicholas' home.

The next morning I could hardly wait to sit down with the computer and get some letters of inquiry out to the Little Westkill neighbors. In no time at all, responses arrived with exciting information: Yes, the road to Hiram's was a public road. Yes, there was an old foundation about a quarter of a mile up the road just beyond the NYS property sign. Yes, we believe that is the old "Wiltse" farm over on the hillside. Talk with Mr. Heisinger, he will tell you all about it.

Yes, that is the old Nicholas J. Sigsbee place, I was born there in 1915. And so it went. Out of six letters written, we had six replies and invitations to stop in for a visit our next time through.



The next possible opportunity found us once again in what was becoming one of our favorite places to be. We parked the car, hiked in on the forbidding looking road that showed no evidence of being maintained since Hiram and family had left in 1888. It was a beautiful hike in however and we were amply rewarded. About a half mile up the road, what looked like an old drive, now overgrown, dropped down the bank to our left. We scrambled down over the bank, and soon found ourselves near an old foundation and retaining wall.



Comparing the stone retaining wall with a couple of old photos we had brought along, we indeed confirmed that we had found the site of Hiram and Salina's homestead.

The old place had changed hands a couple of times after Hiram and Salina and family left before the turn of the century, with the Martin family living upon it for approximately thirty-five years. When Rufus Martin sold it to the People of the State of New York in 1933, a clause was put in the deed that they had up to two years to take down or move the buildings thereon. As we were to learn a few weeks later, George Hitchcock had taken the place down and the materials were used in the building of his home over near Windham. What we saw before us now, was the old house foundation, the yard retaining wall, and the old barn foundation.

While strolling through the barnyard area, which the forest was fast reclaiming, I reached down and picked up the rusted remnants of a milk can. Two copper letters “_E_S_” clinging to the metal was a clear message from the past that this was indeed where the PERSONS family had farmed over a hundred years ago.

The other photo we had along with us was of a log cabin. In front of it stood my father at the approximate age of fourteen. My brother Lynn had remembered hearing that the photo had been taken in that area when my father and grandparents had gone back to visit the old homestead. He was sure the cabin had been on Hiram's land. With this mystery yet to be solved, we resolved to return the following month with tent in order to camp out on the old homestead ground. After all, in my pocket was a deed to the property saying that *‘the parties of the second part shall quietly enjoy the said premises’* and as People of the State of New York, parties of the second part, I knew that meant us.

However, before this trip was over we had one more stop to make. Terry Peckham, right down the road had been born on Nicholas Sigsbee's place. A knock on the door and soon we had a very friendly face before us. Terry told us his father was renting the farm at the time of his birth and that he had owned it himself for many years. He was sure the house had never been altered in any major way. There had been an addition put on sometime after the original structure had been built. This could have been done anytime between 1830 and 1900. After a very interesting visit, we agreed to stop by our next time through.

Back at home again, a wonderfully informative letter arrived from the family now in possession of the “Sigsbee” house inviting us to go through it if we desired. We were pleased to discover that so many of the families were interested in the history of their area and so willing to share it with others. A few more letters went out in connection with the “Wiltse” farm and a couple of more visits were made to the County Clerks. In just a few more days we would be “quietly enjoying the premises” of my great grandfather Hiram Persons. Hopefully, we would be walking upon the old plank floors and gazing out at the fields through Nicholas Sigsbee's windows. And if we were real lucky, we would have made our way through all the old deeds and would be talking with today's owner of the “Wiltse” farm.

Dawn was breaking on the 19th day of May, 1990. The rains had stopped, momentarily at least, and Tar and I having packed the car the night before were ready to strike out for several visits with the “Little Westkill” neighbors.

Our first stop was at the Magnus place. Mrs. Magnus graciously showed us through my great great grandfather Sigsbee's home. After visiting in the living room and seeing the dwarf chimney in the dining room with evidence of stoves in both rooms, we climbed the steep stairs leading to the sleeping quarters. We looked out through the low multi-paned window that “little

Salina” (my great grandmother) had most likely peered out of on many a morning. Back outside we passed by the milkhouse sitting over a spring and looked into the ruins of the old root cellar cut into the hillside beside the main house. It was easy to see my great great grandmother Jemima, coming out of it with potatoes in hand for the evening’s meal. At the front porch, we stood silently in awe of the view before us. Heading back towards the barn, we noticed the outhouse still in perfect preservation. After admiring the big old hand hewn beams in the barn, we strolled out through the fields. What an absolutely beautiful spot. Even with trees starting to reclaim the now unused farm land, the 360 degree view of the surrounding mountains was still evident and breathtaking. We thanked Mrs. Magnus for sharing this with us and with invitation in hand to return for a visit, we went on to our next stop.

Terry Peckham has lived all his life in these Little Westkill Hills. As a boy he had scrambled over all the backroads and has many memories of days gone by. He remembered as yesterday, the day Hiram’s house had been taken down. Of course the family he knew as having lived on the old place was that of Rufus Martin. When inquiring of him of the “cabin” he knew exactly the one of which we were speaking.

Yes, it stood on up the road on the right from the Martin place. Yes, it was on State land, a part of the acreage once belonging to Hiram and Salina.

Bidding Terry adieu for the day, we then went on down for a visit with Blanche Howard. Blanche, a very very young 84 year old lady, is living proof of what a lifetime in this beautiful valley does for someone. With sparkling eyes she told us of the old “Wiltse Farm” and of the other neighboring places. Upon seeing the photo of the old log cabin that we showed her, she remembered seeing it as a girl up beyond the “Martin” place. And confirming what we were already 99% sure of, she said “yes, that looks like the house that stood at the head of the valley”. This in regard to the photo of the white house which once stood on the old foundation at Hiram and Salina’s homestead.

After finishing the plateful of homemade cookies and warming ourselves with hot tea, we were once again on our way.

Parking the car along the road by the site of the old schoolhouse, Tar loaded the “dolly” to truck in our stuff. With heavy Coleman chest packed with tasty food, threadbare tent, old army sleeping bag of canvas, wool and down, and packs on our backs, we started our quarter mile trek.

Joyce Frier’s remembrances of their trips with her father Frank Persons to this very spot came to mind. In the best of times, the road probably had never been good. After all the rains we had been having lately, it looked more like a fresh running brook. Having borrowed a video camera from a friend, I marched along behind Tar who was doing very well in pulling the hundred pounds or so of paraphernalia along this extremely rough road.

Around a half hour later we reached the overgrown driveway to the left leading down to the old homestead. At the bottom of this old drive, we parked our “stuff” and walked across the running spring to the old home site. Tar started to clear fallen branches away from the front lawn area and soon had a place to set our tent while I gathered dry kindling wood for the campfire.

While waiting for the fire to produce hot coals for cooking our supper upon, we strolled around the place again. This time we checked out the old spring from which water was amply flowing, and found the area where the old milkhouse had sat. One could almost see Eli, Frank and James, the oldest sons of Hiram and Salina, coming out of the barn with milkcans in hand, heading toward this spring cooled structure.

Through tiny openings in the trees, the mountains on the other side of the valley were visible. What a beautiful view this must have been when many of the trees were cleared for farming.

In the year of 1874, Eli and Cora were around five and six years of age, and Lettie was just born. Thanks to an old census record, we can pretty well see what took place on this family homestead in that particular year. Hiram had 17 head of milch cows, and they produced three hundred pounds of butter. They had two working oxen to help bring in thirty tons of hay, 80 bushels of oats, 56 bushels of buckwheat and 35 bushels of potatoes. Their fifty apple trees produced 297 bushels of apples, from the maples they collected enough sap to boil down for 195 pounds of maple sugar. Seeing first hand, the rock ledge of this mountain, we realized how difficult it must have been to have carved out a homestead which was to sustain this family of thirteen.

Back at the campfire, we soon had the potatoes boiling, hotdogs frying, and table (rock) set. With farm fresh milk from our neighbor farmer back home, cabbage salad, homemade bread and rhubarb, we sat down to eat with the air filled with the serenading of birds. After finishing, we fetched water from the spring and soon had our utensils washed and put away.

As we entered our tent and lowered our tired bodies to the ground, I could not help but wonder if my grandfather Albert S. Persons, who was born here in 1880, had once draped an old blanket over a wooden stake and retired upon these same hard grounds for a like adventure of “camping out”.

To our pleasant surprise, we learned that the birds didn't retire as early as we, their beautiful music continued till midnight and one was even heard to voice his opinion at two in the morning.

Around three o'clock the sound and feel of raindrops falling on our heads awoke us again. Knowing the sad condition of our tent and figuring the worst was yet to come, we pulled the sleeping bag over our heads and slept well till seven o'clock. With a slight drizzle still coming down, we discarded the idea of another campfire for the breakfast sausage and instead ate heartily on homemade bread, butter and rhubarb. Since the sky didn't look promising, we hastily got our things together and were soon trudging on our way back down the "old country road". Up ahead we thought we saw several children skipping merrily along on their way to the little one room school house. But as I raised the video camera to my eye, they vanished. I wonder....

Yes, there are days which are well spent in musty basements of old county buildings when doing family research. But one cannot surpass the days of getting out into the sunshine, walking the country roads, meeting the people who now enjoy the same fields, mountains, and valleys that once played such a major part in the lives of our ancestors.