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HIGHGATE AS SEEN FROM AN OLD
ACCOUNT BOOK

A STUDY OF ENTRIES MADE BY WILLIAM STEARNS, A
FARMER AND CHAIR-MAKER, WHOSE MEANS WERE
LIMITED. THE PERIOD COVERED IS FROM
1824 TO 1833

By GEORGE POMEROY ANDERSON

An old account book, as seen through the eyes of the unanointed, seems to be a most useless fragment of a forgotten past. Seen through anointed eyes, its dingy pages reveal a community living again over a century or more—in the sense, at least, that what a man pays for food, what he eats, what he earns, what he buys, what he spends, are very real factors in living. Various types of old account books tell different stories, of course—stories of the quality and character of a community, its interests, economic certainly, often social and even esthetic, its points of view, its decay or growth. We believe that in Mr. Anderson's pioneering study—pioneering so far as the Proceedings is concerned—a satisfactory technique is in evidence that could be used in the study of other account books. Dispute will rage endlessly about documents left to us by leaders in controversial issues, but quietly, often wearily no doubt, common men and women kept their accounts whose validity for historical purposes we cannot question—accounts that hold in fading script today the essence of vanished lives and days. Additional comment will be found in the Postscript. Editor.

I. INTRODUCING WILLIAM STEARNS

IN the belief that useful and interesting sidelights on living conditions and business practice in pioneer days in the town of Highgate, Vermont, might be obtained, I have made a somewhat critical examination of entries in an account book of my great-grandfather, William Stearns, who was a farmer, and in a small way, a chair-maker or manufacturer in that town. The period covered is from 1824 to 1833, with, here and there, a few entries before the first-named date. Stearns was in humble circumstances and may be described almost as a poor man, certainly one of limited resources. He was honest and industrious, however, and made a good fight to get ahead and improve his position in life.

His struggle was typical, I think, of that of a great many other settlers in Highgate. They worked early and late, had almost no relaxation, had few of the things we call comforts, and almost no luxuries. His struggles and those of his neighbors are suggested by the entries. If we think our present era is hard, when we are trying to lay the ghost of a depression, then have a look at the everyday life of William Stearns and his neighbors, as demonstrated by the daily doings of the Highgate men of 1824-1833. In the first place, the town was almost isolated. It lies next to Lake Champlain and borders the Canadian line. No railroads of course, no roads except those that were very primitive, and little fun, except some dances and the annual muster. The trade contacts were chiefly to the north. Little from New York City or Boston reached Highgate. Some goods did trickle in from Albany, N. Y.

The town, doubtless, had from the south a very occasional peddler. Commodities were few in supply and probably came from St. Johns, Canada, having come to that place from Montreal, which in turn had received them from Quebec, which had got them from England, France or Holland. Possibly a little might have reached Quebec from Boston, but the arrivals must have been very infrequent. They were almost shut off from the world. If they got enough salt from St. Johns to enable them to "put down" their pork and beef, that was a sort of triumph. No bank was near enough to be of any use commercially. A newspaper was a great rarity. Nothing but candle-light and not much of that for they had little to read. Believe it or not, that is about the way Highgate, and many another distant Vermont town, was in the decade which is under examination.

Two decades later, when the railroads had penetrated this distant section of the state, the picture was greatly changed, and by 1855 there was a still greater transformation and the word "comfort" first began to be associated with most homes. Each decade since has made its contribution toward raising the standard of living, and Highgate has had its just share of this advance, yet, somehow, I do not believe the average rural Vermonter realizes how much better off he is than the people of a century ago. This account book in a faltering way suggests the story. If Stearns had put more human interest items into its pages, we should have a better idea of those early conditions, but he was weary, and I suspect his prosaic and hard life of grinding toil sent him each night to bed utterly tired out. At any rate he died in the early forties.

The account book itself, from which this study is made, is about fifteen inches long and slightly more than six inches wide. The pages are nicely ruled and arranged to permit entries of trade transactions. The paper has no water-mark, but is of excellent quality and almost certainly is of British manufacture. The covers are of pasteboard, but the binding is calfskin. The book has seen hard usage, but its entries, all, of course, made by quill pens, are in good condition except in a very few cases. The recovery of the information contained in its pages has been like snatching a brand from the burning.

Before the account book came into my possession, it had been used as a scrapbook, and only here and there a name was visible. As the pasting of newspaper items proceeded, the book naturally swelled, and so, in order to make it manageable, about a third of the pages were cut out. In this condition the book was such a hopeless proposition that after trying ineffectually to steam off the clippings, I laid it aside and for thirty years it was wholly neglected. A year ago I said to myself: "I will find out what there is in that damned book." So I took a sponge and a basin of water, and for three days I soaked out the newspaper clippings of foolish jokes and dull poetry that appeared in its pages, and at the end of those three days I had my reward. I had before me a record of the daily doings of my great-grandfather, as disclosed by the entries.

Badly mutilated the book was by the cutting out of those pages; many credit items were gone, the mutilation always being on the right-hand page, but still there remained entries showing the names of about 165 people who lived in Highgate, Swanton, and Sheldon. By studying them I got some ideas, and some light, which I propose, in

my poor words, to pass on to the reader. Perhaps someone who has an older and larger account book, with a better setting, may be moved to make a record that is more complete and satisfying. There must be such books in existence. They are, in my opinion, the best sort of documents to show what was going on 100 or 150 years ago in primitive rural Vermont.

One unexpected compensation has attended the process of restoring the record—the ink remains excellent. It was black and it must have been of the best English quality. After all my “sozzling” with a sponge, there are only three or four illegible words, and none of them seems important. The spelling in spots is among the world’s worst, although I have seen a number of other account books as bad. Any account book, that has been kept by a settler lacking a higher education, covering the years between, say, 1700 and 1850, is apt to disclose the most weird spelling. Most of it will be phonetic, and it is a help when one realizes that the writer is trying to spell a word according to the sound of its pronunciation in common speech. There are plenty of exceptions, of course, to this condition. I have before me a Connecticut account book of 1765-1770, kept by a fine family—the Whitneys and Sherwoods—and some of its entries are terrible—“Ceeping school,” for instance. You wonder what kind of a school that was. Probably it was a very good one considering the times, but with more common sense than grammar.

Let us return to my lowly but energetic great-grandfather, William Stearns. At the time the book opens he was married to his cousin, Sarah (Sally) Stearns, and was about thirty-four years old. He had six children, all of whom were small. His father, Solomon Stearns (1763-1842), had come to Highgate before 1800, having previously lived for more than a decade in the town of Chester, in Windsor County, Vermont. He and others from Worcester, Mass., and vicinity, had gone to Chester, following the lead of Thomas Chandler of Worcester who had gone first to Walpole, N. H., and, after a short stay there, had moved to what is now called Chester, but which originally had been called Flamstead and New Flamstead under Benning Wentworth’s grants in what is now Vermont. Chandler became a Loyalist, although his son was a supporter of Vermont. It may be that Solomon Stearns was a Loyalist and that he went to Highgate to get into an atmosphere where he could start even again under a new regime. I have never found satisfactory evidence as to his motive in leaving Chester. Perhaps he went merely because he

thought that Highgate was a town in its infancy—as it was in 1800—and he believed he could get ahead there. Another brother, Shadrack Stearns, went to Poultney, and still another, Benjamin Stearns, father of Sally, wife of William, went to Swanton at the time they left Chester. The pioneer rule was to move on, after getting ahead as far as one could in a given location. Solomon, living up to his name, moved on.

Solomon and his wife, Jemima Clark of Grafton, Mass., had twelve children, some born in Chester, and some in Highgate.¹ Our William was born in Chester, about 1790, so some of his other descendants inform me, but the Stearns genealogy does not even mention him, and makes some mistakes in recording the other children so that one is bewildered in searching for the truth. We know, however, that Solomon's father was Samuel Stearns (1720-1776) and that he was in the group that went to Chester from Worcester. Samuel's father was Captain John Stearns (1692-1762) of Lexington, Mass., and the captain's father was another John Stearns (1657-1722), while the first one of all who is known, Charles Stearns, was located as early as 1646 in Watertown, Mass., a town just outside of Boston. All of which means that our William Stearns was of the sixth generation from the Watertown pioneer.

I have spoken of the spelling in the account book as being bad. It was bad, but it should be remembered that dictionaries were not generally current in those days and such spelling as Stearns learned in Chester, Vermont, was not very illuminating. On the whole, after reflecting, and comparing the account book with others that I have seen, it is quite passable. He writes "yallow" for yellow; says "peace" when he means piece; writes "cullering" for coloring; "paster" for pasture, and "oar" for ore. All that he wrote was phonetic. His worst spelling was "uice" for use. I still shudder over that. On the other hand, such words as acre, knapsack, turnip (usually "turnup" in Connecticut account books), molasses, pantaloons, contra ("contry" in Connecticut), bushels, augers, and onions are correctly written. When not quite certain what the correct spelling might be, he sometimes cheerfully uses several types—thus I found "churn,"

1. *Genealogy and Memoirs of Charles and Nathaniel Stearns, and Their Descendants*, by Avis Stearns Van Wagenen (1901). This account gives the descendants of two distinct separate unrelated Stearns families. The Franklin County line comes from Charles of Watertown, Mass.

“chern” and “chirn.” Yet he knew what he was writing about every time.

II. EARLY RACKETEERS APPEAR

BENNING WENTWORTH'S land-granting machine was going at top speed when the Highgate charter was issued on August 17, 1763. On that day Georgia and St. Albans also were granted charters. He apparently had come to the conclusion that the King might decide the dispute between New Hampshire and New York against his interest. Therefore, he had his scribes get busy and at once various towns in what now are Franklin and Chittenden Counties were chartered. In 1763 a total of three grants was issued. The grantees who paid the fees were speculators, most of them living in Northampton, Mass., or in that vicinity. Not one of them ever came to Highgate and none of them ever intended to do so. The Royal decree in favor of New York's claim to what is Vermont, coming in 1764, made the Wentworth grants worthless—at least, so New York claimed.² So the grantees were glad to sell out for a song to Ira Allen and some other members of that family, and after extensive “finagling” by the Allens, nearly all of Highgate fell into Ira Allen's lap, his brother Levi getting a good slice of St. Albans and much of Swanton.

The Wentworth grant of Highgate covered 23,040 acres. A New York grant issued in 1771 for 2,000 acres to S. Metcalf & Company, another speculating bunch, covered part of Highgate, but it caused no local disturbance in Highgate and merely enabled the estate of Simon Metcalf in 1789 to enlarge its demand for compensation when Vermont for \$30,000 bought off the New York claim. Of the original grantees, Hilkiah Grout was of some importance, and others of note are Colonel William Symes, who was authorized to be moderator of the first meeting of the town, Samuel Hunt and a group of other members of that family, and Ebenezer Pomeroy and others of that name. Some of the Pomeroyes settled much later in Franklin, Vermont, among them Dr. Enoch Pomeroy, my great-grandfather,

2. The best and most recent statement of the merits of the controversy between Vermont and New York over the contested tract of land now embraced in the state of Vermont, is found in *Vermont in the Making* (1939) by Matt Bushnell Jones. Every Vermonter should read it. [Note review in this issue. Editor.]

and some of the Hunts settled elsewhere in Franklin County, but they had to buy their own land back from Ira Allen.

William Teachout was one of the very early Highgate settlers. Not only is his name in the account book, but also other Teachouts—Minard, Lewis, Patterson, and Jacob. In the north part of the town modern maps show Teachout Hill. William Teachout was in Highgate as early as 1788 when he and John Waggoner had trouble with Louis, an Algonquin chief, who came into the settlement and boldly appropriated fifteen bushels of potatoes from Teachout, and several bushels of corn from Waggoner. The theft made starvation seem imminent.

In language, quite like that of a Chicago or New York racketeer of our own day, Chief Louis informed Teachout and Waggoner that although the Indians owned the land, if the settlers would give them one-fourth of the produce they raised, they might remain. It was useless to resist. The two settlers later formally under oath took their complaint to Ira Allen who was then hand and glove with Sir Guy Carleton, both of them, by the way, being Free Masons. The settlers had bought their land of Allen, and naturally they expected protection from redmen racketeers. They got it. Chief Louis quit and left them alone. This incident in 1788 does not look as if these two men had any doubt about what country they were operating in, and in itself should discredit the oft-repeated story that the firstcomers to Highgate thought they were in Canada.

In his very scholarly and illuminating study of political conditions following the Revolutionary War, entitled *The Missisquoi Loyalists*,³ not long ago published by this Society, Thomas C. Lampee of Boston mentions William Teachout and John Hilliker of Highgate, also John Waggoner of Swanton, and says that all three were Loyalists and former Loyal Rangers who served on the British side at the time of the Burgoyne invasion. I believe this to be true, but while they lived in Highgate and Swanton, they seem to have been under no cloud because of previous adherence to the Crown, and Minard Teachout of Highgate was one of the early town officers.⁴ In those

3. *Proceedings of the Vermont Historical Society*, Volume VI, Number 2, issued in June, 1938.

4. The Teachouts probably are of Dutch origin, and may be connected with Jacob Tissoort who in 1763 was a grantee of Duxbury, Vermont, under Benning Wentworth. "Tissoort," when spoken quickly, sounds like Teachout. There are numerous Teachouts in Essex and Essex Junction where the family

days bygones had to be bygones, the immediate problem being how to get tomorrow's breakfast.

Thomas Best whose name appears frequently in the account book came from Hoosic, Albany County, N. Y., and probably was a brother of Conrad and Hermanus Best, who also came from Hoosic. They were Loyalists who located in Missisquoi County in Canada but were little better than squatters on certain Indian lands. Conrad and Hermanus remained in Canada, but Thomas early saw the light and chose to settle in Highgate. This is one of many instances of a family divided by the issues of the war.

Thomas Best was one of the best-liked men in Highgate. When John Saxe,⁵ the original pioneer of that family, made his will on March 28, 1807, he named Best as one of his three executors, the other two being Matthew Saxe, his son, and Charles Miller. One of the three witnesses was Philip Ruiter, a son of Captain Henry Ruiter who was one of the principal Loyalists in the dispute about the right to the land in the Missisquoi district in Canada. Best's name occurs fairly often in the Stearns' account book. He owned a marble quarry, one of the first ever operated in northern Vermont, but its success was only moderate. The product was of a bluish tinge. Some of it is found in early Vermont and New York cemeteries.

In a recent address delivered by Dr. Samuel Eliot Morison, the eminent historian of Harvard College, on the "Log Cabin Myth" he claimed that the earliest settlers in Massachusetts—the Pilgrims and Puritans—did not live in log houses but in frame buildings from boards that were sawed by the settlers soon after they arrived. I do not know how he can know that, but perhaps he is right. What the Pilgrim fathers did, I do not pretend to say, but I do know that there were plenty of log cabins in Highgate in 1824-1833. What is more, William Stearns made a business of erecting log cabins and renting them to settlers whose means were limited. These were not the overnight cabins of the present era but a real home. The rent charged was ridiculously low—\$1 a month in most cases, or \$1.25 a month if a garden patch was to be thrown in.

This was a profitable venture for Stearns. No items in the book has lived 100 years. Vrest Teachout Orton of Weston, Vermont, the well-known author and publisher, is connected with this family, his mother being a Teachout.

5. *Genealogy of the Saxe Family* (1930), by John Godfrey Saxe of New York.

better illustrate the humble circumstances of the Highgate pioneer, than these log cabin entries. If a man wished to build his own cabin, Stearns was ready to sell him the required logs for \$3, which again seems ridiculously low. Think what you will of William Stearns, I believe you will agree that he was no profiteer. He did not know the meaning of the phrase, "main chance."

III. THREE MELTING-POT ELEMENTS

JUST as Julius Caesar stated that "All Gaul is divided into three parts," so in the beginning Highgate was occupied by three groups—the Dutch and Germans whom I lump together, the French Canadians, and the English, or as we may more truly describe them, the New England Yankee stock chiefly from Massachusetts and Connecticut. Let us look at these three groups. The French easily slipped across the boundary line, not being just sure where it was, but being a bit particular that they were well across the line and inside the new state of Vermont.

The first Frenchman to come was Joseph Reycard who arrived only twenty-six years after James Wolfe had taken Quebec from the French. Reycard arrived in 1785, or 1786, and settled on what used to be known as the Drury farm, snug up to the line. In the following year, a child, Abram Reycard, was born, and it is claimed, but disputed by the Steinhours, that this child was the first person born in the town. James Bopee came about this same time, and thus began the gradual infiltration of Franklin County from the North, a process still in operation and which is destined, perhaps, to result eventually in two or three northern Vermont counties becoming pretty thoroughly dominated by French influences. Thus there lives today, in a different form, the ghost of the ancient dream of New France. Not in the seignories as set forth, chiefly in documentary form, about three centuries ago, but in farms individually owned by the French with large families that can cultivate them, while the Yankee with a smaller family, and with members of it unwilling to stay on the home place, has sold out and relinquished his acres to the Canadians.

Turning to the pages of the Stearns account book we find some French names, although the big influx into Highgate did not come until after the collapse of the Papineau rebellions in 1839, when they came trekking across the line in goodly numbers, establishing large groups in Swanton and St. Albans, and no small group in Highgate.

There was before long a "French settlement" in Highgate, and it is there today, somewhat diffused. Stearns did not have many of these Canadians as customers, but such names as Antoine Benway, Hiram Fountain, and Jerry Goodheart occur, with others from the Fisher, Long and Boodry families, also Peter "Shambro," who may have been an Archambault. All of them apparently were in humble circumstances as regards worldly goods, a condition comparable today to that of the Jews of Europe who are being hounded out of Germany, Austria and other points by the ruthless Hitler regime. These Frenchmen would cheerfully perform hard labor, however, and the book shows that they worked for forty cents a day. Had they been of English extraction they would have received the full wage for day labor which was fifty cents a day. Plenty of items show that sum, with seventy cents in the haying season.

Referring again briefly to the Papineau rebellion which brought out the Highgate militia for patrol duty along the border line, my grandfather, John Anderson, was in that military company and received from the United States Government as pay for his patrol service a warrant for 160 acres of land in Wisconsin. William Stearns (Junior) and Eldad, sons of William, our pioneer, also received them, along with the rest of the military company. My grandfather sold his land warrant to a speculator for \$50. To him Wisconsin was at the end of the world, and as a matter of fact the population of Wisconsin in 1836 was only 11,000. Many northern Vermont men went to that state in the next twenty years and one of them, Joseph H. Babcock, from Swanton, was one of the leading figures in Congress for a very long period. He was a sort of political boss, with power equal to that of the La Follettes.

The first census of Highgate, taken in 1791, showed a population of 103. The heads of families were seventeen in number, and of those apparently fourteen were Dutch or German. This will show how in the beginning for a short time Highgate was a Dutch community. It has been said that these first settlers were Hessians, soldiers who had decided not to go back to Germany. As a matter of fact I do not believe a single one of them was a former Hessian soldier. I think that they were almost entirely Loyalists who had lived in the Hudson Valley in the state of New York and had started to settle in Lower Canada, in "Dunn's Patent" or Missisquoi County as it now is called, and not getting a valid title of their lands, and getting a cold deal from General Haldimand, who did not want them located

there, they decided to return to the United States and naturally went to the first town at hand, which was Highgate.

There is a story, often repeated, that these early settlers in Highgate did not know that they were settling in the United States but thought they were in Canada. That is farfetched and should, in my opinion, be dismissed. They might for a few days or weeks have been deceived, but the state of Vermont had been in existence since 1777, and deeds to land in Highgate had to come from Ira Allen who owned most of the town. These first settlers were not ignorant squatters. They legally got their lands and there never afterwards was any question about their title. In the 1800 census of Highgate appears the name "John Steinmetz." He came from Hesse-Cassel, and I believe the whole yarn—and it is a yarn—about the Highgate settlers being former Hessians came from his presence. This name is now spelled Stimets by the Highgate records.

Let us return to that first census of Highgate. Here are the heads of families as written: Waggoner, John; Sat (Saxe), John; Galor, Baunt; Shidler (Shelter), John; Claw (probably Cray), John; Willeen, Corneleies; Steinhawer (Steinhour), George; Scisco (Sisco), Henry; Pangiman, Peter; Fitchout (Teachout), Jacob; Scrior, Nicholas; Wilson, George; Lampman, Michael; Lampman, Abraham; Butterfield, Jonathan; Frazer, Daniel; and John Hilliker. At least thirteen of the seventeen were Dutch or German, and in my opinion there is a great chance that all those thirteen were of Dutch stock from the Hudson Valley in New York. The Teachouts, I believe, came from Half Moon, a town then in Albany County, N. Y., now Saratoga County. The New York census of 1790 shows eight "Tichouts" in Half Moon. By the way, that place with its intriguing name is still on the map and is near Mechanicsville. The first Saxe came from Rhinebeck.

The 1800 census of Vermont shows in Highgate more Dutch people, such as the Hogles, Odells, Asseltines, Hoggabooms, Hoffmans, Hockstadts, Gunmans, Helms, Propers, and Scheyers, to mention only a few. Some of these families are still represented in Swanton and Highgate. Those whom I have known, and others whom I know by report, have been excellent citizens and will easily pass as old-fashioned Yankees. The process of assimilation usually was complete in two or three generations. It is so now, but I am not sure that the newcomers of today are as grateful for the shelter given them in a new haven. Too many of them, riding around in their

automobiles, are critical because the W.P.A. does not furnish enough pay.

The third element in the town, namely the English stock, in contrast to the other two groups, furnished the moneyed settlers. They had the "largest resources" as they came to town, but that was a relative term. They had "sold out" in Massachusetts and Connecticut and taking their profits had gone to a new pioneer center. They had behind them experience and a knowledge of town government. Neither of the other two elements was well grounded in knowledge of New England institutions, such as self-government, and they had—some of them—a fair education. Therefore, they soon were in control of the town, elected the officers, sent a representative to the Assembly, and before long were "running things." Gradually the Dutch worked into places of responsibility, and at a later period the French took a hand in affairs. The melting pot thus began its work, and while the fusion may be called completed, it remains to be seen to what an extent the French will endeavor to push their influence. Certainly the French are capable of honest government.

No Vermont place name has been so mauled and twisted and distorted for two centuries as the Indian word which now appears officially in hybrid form, both in Canada and in this country, as "Missisquoi." There are more than thirty ways in which that word has been spelled on maps, documents, and books. Nearly 200 years ago on the De Lery map of Lake Champlain the spelling was Michiscouy. Other early versions are "Missiskoui" and "Messiskow." The meaning in each case is said to be taken from an Algonquin Indian word "missi" signifying "much" and "kisco" meaning either waterfowl or grass. The "kisco" seems more sensible because the Indians, always in search of food, would be more interested in waterfowl than grass. The "missi" meaning "much" is not confined to the Algonquin tongue but is found in many western Indian tribes and the word "Mississippi" means "much water."

In Ira Allen's day "Missisque" was quite commonly used, and Zaddock Thompson in 1824 spelled it that way, but explains, curiously, that it is pronounced "Missisco." Naturally, I wondered what spelling Stearns would use, knowing that whatever he wrote would be his phonetic interpretation of a word he must have heard spoken a great many times. The word appears in his book only once and is then written "Musseskoie." Probably that is the way it sounded to him in Highgate at this early period. Not liking to struggle with the