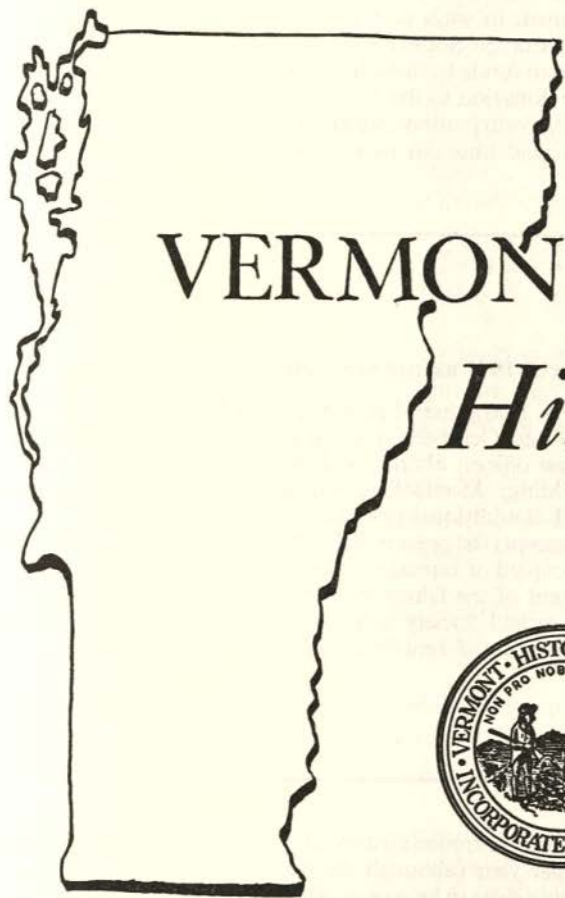


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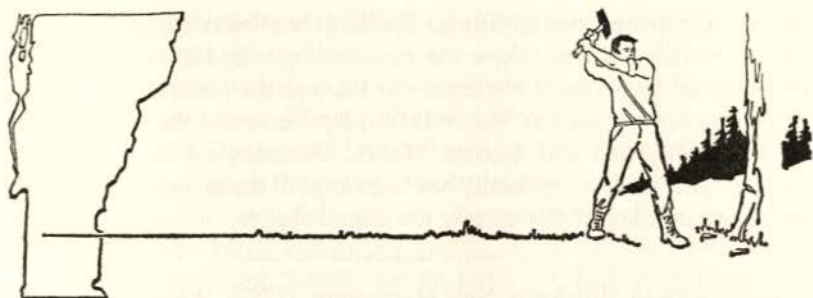


VERMONT

History



The PROCEEDINGS of the
VERMONT HISTORICAL SOCIETY



This memoir of living in Cabot, Stowe, and other Vermont towns describes how an average person supported himself and his family a century and more ago. . . .

William Cheney (1787–1875): The Life of a Vermont Woodsman and Farmer

Edited by REBECCA C. SKILLIN

BEING IN his 87th year, and blind, William Cheney dictated this memoir of his long life in December, 1874. He was hoping to have this account included in *The Cheney Genealogy*, then being compiled by Charles Henry Pope and ultimately published in Boston in 1897.¹ Because of its length, however, Pope was unable to incorporate it into his volume.

During the 97 years since it was dictated Cheney's memoir was passed four times from one descendant to another. Until recently it was in the hands of Mr. and Mrs. Harold Cheney in Minneapolis, who sent it to another relation in Vermont at the suggestion of an historical society in Minnesota. Thus it is offered to readers of *Vermont History*.

There is a fresh and appealing quality about William Cheney's speech and outlook on life which creates a picture of pioneer life in Vermont. Since historians often write about prominent men and famous events it seems worthwhile to let this elderly gentleman, an obscure woodsman and farmer, have space in *Vermont History* to describe life in Vermont as he experienced it.

No editorial changes have been made beyond supplying punctuation

1. A copy of *The Cheney Genealogy* is in the Library of the Vermont Historical Society.

where it clarifies the meaning. Spelling has been corrected silently except in those words where the mis-spelling may indicate pronunciation. It also seems mere conjecture to attempt the positive identification of persons referred to as Major Davis, Squire Joslin, the man Morgan, Richard Maynard and Samuel Marsh. Genealogical identification of members of the Cheney family has been kept to the minimum needed for an understanding of the text by the casual reader.

I was born in Hillsboro, New Hampshire, [1787]. When I was 8 years old my Father² went on to a piece of wild land & I being very fond of an axe He rigged me out with a little one & I went with him every day to the follow [fallow?] to be company for Him & to see how many little trees I could cut. Father was much astonished at the way I made the little trees fall.

Father continued on the farm till I was 17 years old. When I was 10 years old Mother³ died leaving Father with seven children. In about 1 year Father married again & to do justice to a Step Mother⁴ she was a smart woman, kind and good to the children. We lived in a wilderness world where I had no chance for school till I was 15 years old. Then I went out of the district about 4 miles & done chores for my board & went to school 10 weeks & I being of a bashful turn of mind I fairly dreaded to read or write before anyone even those of 7 or 8 years. After my 10 weeks [of] school I returned to Father's & when I was 16 years old I hired out for the season to Governor Benjamin Pierce⁵ whose son in after years became President of the United States.

When I was 17 years old Father sold his farm & removed to Cabot, Vermont. Here I went to school 9 weeks which finished my education.

During this time I had become a scienced hand with an axe so that it took the best of choppers to drop me on a log & as the farm was wild that Father went on to I helped him wonderfully in clearing up the farm. As the country was very new at that time & money was very scarce, Farmers, after their fall's work was done up, they would shoulder their axes & go to the woods & chop down the timber & log it up, burn it to ashes & make salts & that would bring money at some price. That was the way Farmers had to get the necessaries of life & pay their taxes. I being a good chopper they would hire me in preference to others

2. Elias Cheney, born in Sudbury, Massachusetts, 14 October 1760.

3. Lucy Blanchard Cheney, born in Hollis, N.H., 4 June 1760.

4. Deborah Winchester Cheney, born in Amherst (Mt. Vernon), N.H., 19 April 1777.

5. Benjamin Pierce (1757-1839), soldier in the American Revolution; Governor of New Hampshire 1827 and 1829.

because I understood how to fall the timber to make it log easy & would pay me extra prices for it.

The spring after I was 19 years old I went to Massachusetts to work. As a reason of my leaving home at this time Boys that worked out could not get cash for their work but had [to] take for pay Neat Stock⁶ on the first of October or grain the first of January & then run their chance of turning that into money. So I left for Massachusetts, hired out on a farm for 6 months at 12 dollars per month, big wages for those times, then returned to Cabot. Continued to work for Father & to job it. Took Father's grass to the halves & filled a 30 x 40 foot barn full with only my brother Elias⁷ to help me. The hay we drew on an ox sled as carts were not to be had for I believe there was not a single cart in town at that time. After this work was done my Brother Elias & I went into the woods, chopped wood, burned [it] to ashes & made [it] into salts through the fall till snow came too deep.

At this time Major Davis of Montpelier used to buy all the salts made through the country & he used to furnish the Towns with a good old Potash Kettle & we had to pay him one shilling for every 100 pounds of salts made. Salts used to be worth from 3 to 6 dollars for 100 pounds.

Perhaps some would like to know how much work a man had got to do to get 100 pounds of salts. He had got to chop logs enough 12 feet long to make about to average 15 cords of 4-foot wood, then burn it to ashes, then put up a great leach & leach them & then boil it down to potash. That would make 100 pounds of potash for which we could get from 3 to 6 dollars minus 12 shillings out for the use of the kettle. I used to cut logs enough in a day to make that amount, then had to pile it & burn it & leach it & boil it down. So you can imagine something near what we had to do for work to get that amount of money.

When we got the kettle of Major Davis we became responsible to him for the kettle but we should let it to all that wanted it & take the shilling per hundred for the use of it & account to him for the same. After we got through one of our neighbors who was very poor had a lot of ashes to make up & wanted this kettle. So we let him have it & in the scrape he cracked it from top to bottom & spoiled it for that purpose. He could not pay for it & denied breaking it also but finally owned it, agreed to pay for it but never did. But we had to make the Major a present of 50 dollars for the kettle & we sold the same for 15, leaving us out of pocket 35 dollars.

During the winter we had to dispose of our half of the hay we had cut

6. Obsolete word for cattle.

7. William's twin brother, Elias Cheney, born 31 March 1787, and died 1813.

on Father's [hayfield] at shares the summer before so that the barn would be clear for the next season but we found no sale for a long time. [At] last, we sold some for 4 dollars per ton & the balance for 3.50 per ton & closed it out.

The next spring my Brother & I went to Massachusetts to work again. Hired out for the season for 12 dollars per month apiece. Came home in the fall & spent the winter at home. In the spring I hired out to Squire Joslin for 4 months at 14 dollars per month. I reserved the months of June & September to do a job of clearing 10 acres of land with my Brother John⁸ for which we were to receive 100 dollars payable when the crop came off the land we were to clear. We also had our board while doing the work, a yoke of oxen to log with & a boy to help us a week.

In the month of June we commenced to chop our job about the 11th day & finished in the month. In September we got it logged up & the job accepted the 16th day of the month. When we got through the man Morgan wanted to write the note Bushels of Wheat, instead of Dollars, so as to give him a chance to make a little as we had a good job of [it]. So we told him to write it as he liked & he wrote it Bushels. Wheat at that time was worth one Dollar per Bushel & some time 75 cents per Bushel but when the note became due wheat was worth 1.50 per Bushel so we got our 50 dollars to pay for the Potash Kettle extra. Then I returned to Joslin's & finished my time & returned to Cabot, Vermont, & worked chopping some.

On the 7th of December, 1809, [I] was married to Miss Mehitable Carr⁹ of Cabot & the next spring moved to Waterford onto a farm of 130 acres which my Brother Elias & I had previously bought in company. Done some work & rolled us up a big log house, a nice one for them times & commenced work on the farm. We continued to work in company till fall when we divided the land & the house & most of the improvements fell on Brother Elias' part. To pay me for what I had done on his part more than on mine, he was to help me roll up a log house & the rest in other work. On or about the 10th of December my brother Elias in company with Brother John was killed by the falling of a tree which the wind blew down while they were putting up a log heap piled against the same tree which had previously been notched. John saw it & hollered to Elias that the tree was falling & Elias being in the thick smoke ran under the tree instead of from it & was killed. In consequence of his death I by not bringing in my account against the estate of my Brother lost about 30 dollars.

8. John Cheney, born about 1790 and died in Lyndon, Vermont in 1827.

9. Mehitable Carr, birthdate unknown. Died in Stowe, Vermont, 22 March 1847.

The next fall I went on & rolled me up a house on my part of the land. Then I went to work & the first year raised 90 bushels of wheat & some other grain, corn, potatoes & the like. Wheat was very low, only 75 cents to five shillings per Bushel. Then I sold my betterments for 120 Dollars, payable the next year in wheat at market price. But before the year came round the man failed & I lost my whole debt. Then I was owing grain which I had borrowed & had to pay one bushel & peck for 1 Bushel. Wheat began to rise & I could not pay for it. The next year wheat was 1.50 per Bushel & the next 2.00 & all this time I could not get anything to pay with for I had nothing to pay with & had my family to support & still my Debt increasing.

On the 3rd of January 1812 a nice little son¹⁰ was born in my cabin, weighing 4½ pounds. During this time & the next summer I was about home till September. Then I was summoned¹¹ by the United States to go to Derby Line as a Soldier & served 6 months for which I was to receive from the State 7½ dollars per month. After the legislature sat they raised our pay to 10 dollars per month so I received 60 dollars & my board & I had to clothe myself out of it.

After returning from the war I removed with my family to the town of Franconia, New Hampshire & myself with another man whose name was Richard Maynard we went to chopping cord wood to make coal for the furnace.¹² Here we stayed 4 years & worked at chopping most of the time. We chopped 3,367 cords of 4-foot wood. We made 16,309 Bushels of coal for the Forge & blacksmith. In this amount of coal that we made we had in the third person to help us burn, as we did not know how to burn. After this, we two tended one blast which lost [lasted?] us about 2½ months. Then they blew out for repairs. We had to use 18 bushels of coal every hour in 24 when the furnace was being rebuilt. We came home in the spring to Waterford, Vermont.

Then I went to Danville, took a farm of Sam'l Marsh. Was rather unlucky there in that I met with an accident which laid me up 2 weeks. My wife with 2 young ladies went to a funeral in the neighborhood of a young lady & the beast that they went with had a colt which was left at home & when they came in sight of other horses she became unmanageable with ladies, running out of the road, up a bank tipping them over, the seat rolling on my wife which hurt her very much. The Doctor

10. William Riley, died in Stowe, 9 July 1881.

11. See *Records of the Governor and Council of the State of Vermont*, Vol. VI, Appendix E, p. 468.

12. Agreement between The New Hampshire Iron Factory Company and Richard Maynard, Minard Babcock and William Cheney, 22 May 1815. Document in the possession of the Editor.

dispaired of her life. The Doctor took my wife home to me, saying, "I have brought your wife home alive & that is all I can say." I went to the wagon, took her in my arms, carried her to the house & put her on a bed. The Doctor attended her closely & thought her recovery doubtful. This made quite a Doctor's bill for me to pay. Beside, I had to hire a maid six months & my misfortune was such that my farm was not very profitable to me.

When my year was up I moved from Danville to Stowe, Vermont, bought me a little place where I lived a few years. Times being hard & money scarce & for labor you had to take neat stock in October and grain in January.

Richard Maynard with myself concluded that we would go to Massachusetts to work. I went in the fall of the year. Worked laying wall until the weather became too cold. From thence we went to Salem. I ran across some coasters, went aboard [one] of them to see if we could get work in Maine. I found that there was enough to do in the chopping line & they would like to have us chop for them. So we went to the State of Maine. Went up [the] Kennebec River 30 miles to the town of Boardingham.¹³ There we went to work, chopped 400 cords of wood.

In the Spring we came back to Massachusetts. Worked laying wall all summer. Was favored with good health, made good wages & came back to Vermont in the fall, finding all well at home.

I then bought 50 acres of land, mostly cleared up. Lived here [Stowe] until my oldest Son was nearly 18 years of age. Then I with my son went into York state. Labored there 8 months. We chopped 50 cords of coal wood before we hired out.

We hired to a man 4 months for \$12 a month each. After our 4 months was out we went to chopping coal wood by the cord, chopped 300 cords. We then started for home, having about \$200 in money. Found all well at home.

When my oldest son became of age, the farm being but practically paid for, I gave it up to him. Then I went in with my youngest son¹⁴ & bought quite a farm. After about a year we desolved [sic] partnership. Then I went about building a house and barn for myself. At this period my three children¹⁵ were all married & settled in life. In December I moved into my new house. There I lived with my wife alone, the same as when we were first married, with the exception of old age, living happily together, enjoying the love of God in our hearts. We lived here

13. Bowdoinham, Maine.

14. Lorenzo Dow Cheney, born 22 July 1814, and died 16 May 1877.

15. William R., Lorenzo D., and Mehitable who was born August 1816 and died 26 March 1890.

15 years, 3 months. Then my wife was taken sick, lived only 10 days,¹⁶ then I was left alone. I then lived with my oldest son where I was kindly treated. Made it my home there 4 years, then I, like most widowers concluded to marry again.¹⁷ Married a woman that I had been acquainted with from a girl & moved on her farm in Elmore joining Stowe. In which time the Government passed an act that all the regular soldiers of 1812 should draw 160 acres of land & the 6 month militia 80 acres & I belonging to the militia drew my land warrant [sic] for 80 acres which warrant [sic] I sold for \$60.00.

After living in Elmore 3 years we sold our farm & bought one in Stowe where we moved to & not long after we moved to Stowe the Government see fit to grant another land warrant [sic] to the militia men, which I also received & sold the same for \$75.00 and about 4 years ago the Government granted to these same milita men a pension of \$96.00 a year during life, which sum I have drawn up to the present time. I have worked making shingles by odd jobs since I came into Stowe. Have made a great many thousand, not less than 500,000.

And one thing more that I would relate. 70 years ago last October 8 & 9 days there was a very uncommon & singular storm. It began to rain the 8th day & was a dreadful cold rain, growing colder & colder until the limbs on the trees that were about the size of a man's thumb became as large as the rest. The rain then turned to snow, snowing very hard, it being very damp & the leaves not half off the trees. They were so loaded that when the wind rose (which it did) it made havoc with the forests, cleaving the branches & killing some animals which were therein. On the eve of the 9th day the snow was 15 inches deep. There being considerable grain destroyed men had to go & shake the trees every little while. The weather remained cold, especially nights, the snow remaining on the meadows 2 weeks & in the forests until the next *June*.

In the year 1816 on the 8 and 9 of June there was another very remarkable snow storm, the snow falling 8 inches deep & the weather very cold so that the ground was frozen considerably & the farmers were out of hay so they turned their cattle into the forest where they found underbrush & leaves to subsist on until the ground became bare again. The weather was so cold during the season that there was no corn raised in the town of Franconia but the crops of English grain were good all through the country. There was snow to be seen on the hills every month of the year. There being many families without bread of any kind for 6 weeks.

16. Mehitable Cheney, wife of William, died in Stowe, Vermont, 22 March 1847.

17. Palace D. (Lanpher) Loomis married William Cheney 26 June 1851.

The 10th day of June 1817 I received from the pardoning love of the Holy Ghost forgiveness of my sins. It was in a beautiful little grove in Danville. I shall never forget how it looked though it is possibly all cut down now.

My wife received the love of God in her heart about 2 weeks before. While my wife lived we together strove hard to live faithful Christians. We found that sweet peace, comfort, and consolation in trying to serve the Lord which this world can never give nor take away.

Not long after we moved to Stowe, there was quite a reformation in our neighborhood and quite a number, about 30, were converted, and united with the church.¹⁸ Then the Church saw fit to choose me as their Deacon which office I accepted & in my weak way and manner have tried to perform its duties to the present time. About 50 years have passed away since I was chosen. I have tried to serve the church well but now old age and its infirmities has come upon me. I am blind and am cut off from many privileges which I used to enjoy, such as reading my Bible, visiting my neighbors & meeting with my Bretheren [sic] for prayer meetings. How I miss those privileges but God is a Merciful Creator and has promised that he will never leave nor forsake His children and that promise has been verified to me.

My companion that I now live with, though a good many years younger than myself, is kind and affectionate and willing to wait upon a poor, old blind companion and afford him every comfort in her power. And my oldest son and wife live in the same town that I live in, have been just as kind to me as children could be, have spared no pains to make my life comfortable and agreeable. And quite a number of Grandchildren who live in the neighborhood with my son and wife have shown all the kindness and affection that could to a poor old Grand pa. My neighbors are all kind and good to me and always have been. And my Townmen have always treated me with great respect. And things have been so overruled in the Providence of God that I have all the comforts of this life that I could ask for. And now I am 87 years old last March and my labor on earth is ended and still with all my infirmities I am a happy man. Feeling the love of God in my heart day by day, shed abroad by the Holy Ghost.¹⁹

Stowe, Vermont. 19 December 1874.

18. Covenant of the Freewill Baptist Church of Stowe and Waterbury, Vermont. Dated 3 November 1831. Document in Editor's possession.

19. William Cheney was born in Hillsboro, New Hampshire, near the Antrim town line, on 31 March 1787. He died in Stowe, Vermont, 8 September 1875.