

William C. and Hannah Virginia: Free Black Vermonters

During the mid-1820's Essex was a happening place. At Hubbel's Falls, in the Summer and early Autumn of 1825, the Essex Bridge Company built a covered toll bridge to replace the previous aging floating bridge. East of the bridge site were Johnson & Hulbert's saw and grist mills and also Joshua Haynes' carding and fulling mill, itself a sizable operation, employing four skilled workmen. In 1826 Roswell Butler bought a quarter of Johnson & Hulbert's power privilege and the rights to build a hemp mill. Nearby, was a second saw mill. Elsewhere in town there were two wagon works, one owned by Samual Page and the other by Henry F. Dolph; Alvinza A. Loyn's tannery and Stephen Skinson's cabinet shop.¹

For an enterprising young black man who earned his wages as a laborer, it was a good place to bring and raise his family. A combination of manufacturing, construction and farm labor could provide a reasonable livelihood. William C. and Hannah Virginia arrived here with their three young sons born prior to 1830.² If the neighbors raised an eyebrow about a black family coming to town, that information has not come down to us.

We don't know when or where William and Hannah were born. At that time most New England states did not yet require the recording of vital statistics, Vermont did not until 1857. However, both grew up in the state. During William's childhood his family drifted from Newbury to Sheldon and he was in the Vermont militia during the build up to the War of 1812; Hannah came of age in Craftsbury. The sons shown in the Census were all born in Vermont, perhaps some here Essex.³

The Virginias' dream did not come true in Essex. The Flood of July 26, 1830 changed everything. It scoured the banks of the Winooski River, washing out the new bridge and all of the town's riverside buildings. Except for the stone grist mill building, all that was left were foundations.⁴ After the initial clean up there wasn't much work for William. By 1833 the Virginia family had moved to Moriah, NY where the iron mining and smelting business was expanding.

End Notes

1 Gerald B. Fox. "A Bridge at Hubbles Falls," Essex Community Historical Society EHCO, (Spring 2007); Jacqueline B. Carr, "Local History and the Vermont Borderlands, 1790-1820," Vermont History 84, No.1 (Winter/Spring 2016), p. 70 & 88; Essex Town Land Records, vol. 3, pg. 564 and vol. 4, pg. 242.

2 U. S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of the Census, 1830 Census, "Manuscript Schedule, Population, Essex, Vermont."

3 For William see family of Jeremiah Virginia, Census of Newbury, VT, 1790, 1800; Sheldon, VT, 1810; for Hannah see Montpelier, *Vermont Christian Messenger*, May 3, 1877.

4 Frank Bent, *The History of the Town of Essex*, (Essex Junction, Vermont: Essex), p. 48.