

# ESSEX COMMUNITY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE • FALL 2020

This has been such an unusual year for all of us. I hope this newsletter finds you healthy and in good spirits. Here in Vermont we were so blessed with such breathtaking foliage that it leaves me speechless. The colors came early, are so vibrant and have lasted longer. We are so blessed to live in such a beautiful state.

We should be celebrating our 30th year of the Harriet Farnsworth Powell Historical Museum. We would have had a celebration but due to COVID-19 everything had to be put on hold. We decided to cancel all of our programs for the year and to have the annual meeting via Zoom inviting our members to join us and have an artifact on hand to talk about and show us. The artifact did not have to be one that represents Essex.

We did not have the museum open at all to the public. Hopefully we will be back on schedule with programs and new museum displays next summer. Even though we have not been open we have still been active behind the scenes. Jerry Fox is continuing his research on doctors in Essex, and an African American family living in Essex in the 1830's. Tim Jerman is continuing to research many topics.

We also purchased a new part to our PastPerfect media software that we will use to document our photos.

We are excited about this because we will now be able to catalogue our pictures into the PastPerfect media software where we will be able to see the photos, not just a write-up about them.

The other exciting news we have is that we now have internet access at the museum. It has been a long time coming. We can even hold board meeting at the museum and include via Zoom other board members that are too far away to make the meetings.

At our annual meeting we welcomed to the board, Chuck Willard. He lives in California and is our webmaster. Chuck does such a wonderful job keeping our webpage updated. We also welcome back Denise Groll. She is working on our collection and inputting the information in the computer. Denise was previously on the board but moved to the State of Georgia. We are so fortunate to have her back.

I would also like to take this time to thank our members and the Town of Essex for their continued support.

With all that is going on in our world, stay safe and stay healthy. Thank you for wearing your mask!

*Eva C. Clough, President*



The Newsletter of the  
Essex Community Historical Society  
Essex and Essex Junction, Vermont

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# THE GREAT FRESHET OF 1830

BY HUBIE NORTON & SCOTT TAYLOR

## PART TWO

**I**n the spring 2020 issue of the ECHO, part one of the “THE GREAT FRESHET OF 1830, the flood of 1830 was described as “...one of the most destructive calamities this town ever witnessed.” This massive freshet resulted in a major relocation of the Winooski River, potentially changing the boundary line between Essex and Williston. Prior to 1830 Alder Brook flowed through Essex Center and turned north to drain into the Browns River but, with this immense flood it was redirected to its current course to now empty into the Winooski River.

So what are the implications of the changes these two bodies of water experienced as the result of the 1830 freshet?

Although no land record searches were undertaken for the areas surrounding the original course of Alder brook as it flowed into the Browns River, early maps did not indicate that the brook served to define any property boundaries. That is, it appears unlikely there were any disputes regarding property ownership with the changes to Alder Brook and, besides, the old channel is generally identifiable with many portions still having standing water. The most significant result due to the change in flow direction for Alder Brook would be of interest to those fascinated about hydrology since the upper portions of Alder Brook which were formally part of the Lamoille River watershed, after the freshet of 1830 that area became incorporated into the Winooski River watershed drainage area.

Interestingly, as much space was given to the change in Alder Brook in local history accounts, these histories do not mention change to the Winooski River in Essex as a result of the 1830 freshet. The physical evidence surely could not be ignored, especially by the land owners adjacent to the old and new channels.

We started our research in the Essex land records assuming that the land was in Essex since most current maps show the boundary between Essex and Williston as the present course of the Winooski River. The Essex tax map does indeed show the land being in Essex with an assigned parcel number and that it is owned by the Green Mountain Power Corporation (GMP). However, we initially were unable to find an assessment for the parcel or a deed to GMP in the Essex land records. Following the chain of title for the surrounding farmland back to the 1820's did not produce a deed for the island parcel. So, we moved our research to the Williston land records and struck gold.

The Williston tax map shows the land as being in Williston and owned by GMP and, in Williston there is actually a

deed recorded in Volume 19 page 687, recorded on July 30, 1918 from Harry and Josie Fay to Winooski Valley Power Co. (predecessor to GMP). It appears that the power company was purchasing numerous land parcels along the Winooski River above the new high dam they had constructed in 1917 at Hubble's Falls (Essex Junction). The impoundment, or back up of water, created by this dam was impacting these low lining areas, including this portion of the Fay property. Interestingly the deed from Fay to the Winooski Valley Power Co. reads “...a certain piece of land known as Fay's Island situated in the towns of Williston and Essex, either or both of them...”. This same deed was later found recorded in the Essex land records. Even as late as 1918 there was confusion about which town the land was in.



### Essex tax map 2019

Fay Island upper left shown in Essex. Town line shown in middle of current Winooski River channel.

In common boundary law there are two terms that define the movement of rivers and streams as they relate to boundary lines. *Accretion* is a gradual change in the course of a river and *avulsion* is a sudden change in a river course such as a river changing course in a flood. If a river changes course through accretion the boundary line changes with the river. If the river changes course through avulsion the boundary does not change. Based on historical maps it appears that the Winooski River made a drastic change in its location during the Freshet of 1830 creating Fay's Island and consequently the change would be





#### **Williston tax map 2019**

Williston Town line loops around Fay Island following the center of the old river channel.

categorized as avulsion, meaning the boundary line existing prior to the river course changing would not be altered. The location of steep banks observed on a recent visit to the Fay Island area, together with Lidar images, suggest that the river likely has had significant course changes over the years but, it does appear that the major shift creating the island occurred as a result of the 1830 flood.

Initially this must have been a shock to Rockwell Morton who owned the land in 1830, that this chunk of valuable river bottom land was now nearly encircled by water. First, how to get to the “island” so it could be utilized for agriculture and secondly, as the Fay’s deed of 1918 noted, which town was this land actually in?

The first issue of access was addressed by utilizing the field road previously described. The land records in Williston answered the second question where the parcel is shown as unmistakably being in Williston and not in Essex, although the Fay deed notation “...Fay’s Island situated in the towns of Williston and Essex, either or both of them...”, did introduce a bit of hedging on the location.

This island parcel changed hands four times after 1830 and following the chain of title in the Williston land records up until the Fays sold it in 1918 there was no apparent question about which town the land belonged to as all of the transactions were recorded in the Williston land records. Likewise Williston does the assessment and is the recipient of taxes paid by GMP for this parcel. Therefore it seems that any confusion about which town Fay’s island is located in has resulted from the cartography that has carried forth since 1830. The maps thus created fostered the misunderstanding that the current course of the Winooski River in this area was the boundary between Williston and

Essex, where the proper town line follows the old course of the river around Fay’s island.

In the end, Mr. Morton, owner at the time of the flood, had a net loss of about 11 acres of usable land that was gobbled up by the new river course. Notably, any maps of this area created after 1830 showing the town line between Williston and Essex as the current course of the Winooski River are incorrect. This includes but, is not limited to United States Geological Survey (USGS) maps, various State of Vermont maps and numerous Town maps for Essex and Williston. The current Essex tax maps show “Fay Island” to be in Essex. Although apparently not a significant statistic, the land mass of Essex may need to be adjusted to reduce it by about 24 acres, the area of Fay Island currently shown on the Williston tax maps. We feel that this research clearly shows that Fay’s Island is in Williston, not Essex, and is not in limbo of “...either or both of them...”. Will numerous other maps affected by these findings ever be adjusted? Stay tuned.

#### **REFERENCES**

Bent, Frank: *The History of Essex*, Vermont 1963

Johnson, John: Map of Essex, Circa 1807, John Johnson Papers at the Bailey/Howe Library, University of Vermont

F. W. Beers: Atlas of Chittenden County VT 1869

Town of Essex tax maps

Town of Williston tax maps

Burlington Weekly Free Press: 30 Jul 1830

71st Congress, 3rd Session, Examinations of Rivers and Harbors, Vol. 1

The Horn of the Green Mountains: Manchester, Vermont 03 Aug 1830

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Clifford, Deborah Pickman & Clifford, Nicholas R.: “*The Troubled Roar of the Waters*” *Vermont in Flood and Recovery*, 1927-1931

Town of Essex Land Records

Town of Williston Land Records

Butler, L. C.: *Historical Address* at Essex 1883

Vermont, State of; VCGI Lidar program

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)

[www.colonialsense.com/](http://www.colonialsense.com/)

<https://twitter.com/vtstatearchives?lang=en>

Dunn, Russell: Vermont Waterfalls

# AFRICAN AMERICANS IN ESSEX BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR...A VERY SHORT STORY..

BY JERRY FOX AND TIM JERMAN, ECHS

It has long interested members of ECHS to document how many people of African-American origin called Essex home prior to the American Civil War. We'll never know the exact number. Census records did record race every ten years, but some people of color may have come and left before the next census or simply gone unrecorded. *We know of only one single mention of anyone of color in any local Essex history from the period.*<sup>(1)</sup> Although adult slavery was never officially legal in Vermont, well-documented research shows that slaves were held until at least 1841 in Burlington and other locations in Vermont, while authorities turned a blind eye.<sup>2</sup>

A review of the annual censuses, beginning in 1790, turns up just one family name, **William Virginia**. He appears in 1830<sup>3</sup>. At that time, there was a category for "free colored persons". We only know from that census that he had five in his household at that time. Only male head of households were listed (that changed in 1850). There were three children under 10, one male 36-55 (William), and one female 24-36. We learn later that this is William's wife Hannah. Another record which is available to us is William's pension record for service in the Vermont Militia during the War of 1812<sup>4</sup>. He served in Captain Amasa Brown's unit around the time of the Battle of Plattsburgh. Brown hailed from Swanton in Franklin County, but we don't know if Virginia was living there at the time. However, we do know that William's father **Jeremiah Virginia** lived in four towns in Franklin County including Fairfax and Swanton around that time so it is highly likely there is a connection there. Jeremiah had been a former slave, a free black man living in Pomfret, Connecticut when he was under threat of being purchased into slavery again during the American Revolution. When Vermont abolished slavery in its first constitution, Jeremiah moved his family to Pomfret, Vermont to ensure his freedom, around 1777<sup>5</sup>. His is a fascinating story too, as is **Hannah Virginia's** mother Phebe, who lived to be 100 and was a popular figure in Montpelier, even posing for a well-known genre painting by Thomas Waterman Wood called "Sunday Morning" (still in the Wood gallery in Montpelier)<sup>6</sup>.

The 1840 census finds **William and Hannah Virginia** living in Moriah, NY. Moriah was a booming lumber center near Port Henry and Crown Point on Lake Champlain's western shore, with 36 sawmills in operation in 1836. It was also an emerging iron ore mining center beginning in 1824, so employment would have been readily available in the early 1830's<sup>7</sup>. By 1850, they had moved to Rome, NY, where they appear in census records until 1890. We learn that William and Hannah had six children: William C. Jr.,

Norman, Charles, Andrew, Feby, and Heman<sup>8</sup>. William Jr. was the only child born in Vermont. William and Hannah were both born in Vermont, and both sets of their parents came from Connecticut. William is listed as a laborer for occupation in early censuses, his sons William Jr. and Charles were barbers. Hannah is listed as a housekeeper, an all-purpose designation by far the most common for women of the period. William was born in 1792, Hannah in 1802. In the last census they appear in, 1880, they were still going strong at 83 and 73 years of age. Neither ever learned or were given the opportunity to read nor write (yes, there's a box for that on the census). William died on October 10, 1882, age 86. He is buried in the Rome Cemetery, Oneida county, NY<sup>9</sup>. Hannah is not buried there, indicating she may have gone to live with one or more of her grown children out of the area.

That's it for what we know from census records until 1870, just one black family in 80 years of record keeping. We don't know how long the Virginias stayed in Essex, how they landed here, or why they left, but we can speculate. There wasn't much in the village in the 1830's beyond businesses on the river; the railroad creating Essex Junction was more than ten years in the future. However, the river was a happening place in the mid-1820's. At Hubbells Falls The Essex Bridge Company built a private covered toll bridge to replace the previous floating bridge over the Winooski River. East of the bridge site were Johnson and Hurlbut's grist and saw mills, and Joshua Haynes carding and fulling mill. In 1826 Roswell Butler bought a quarter of Johnson and Hurlbut's power privilege and the rights to build a hemp mill. A second sawmill was nearby. Elsewhere in town there were two wagon works, owned by Samuel Page and Henry F. Dolph; also a tannery and Stephen Skinson's cabinet shop. All of these businesses provided some employment.

For an enterprising young black man, Essex may have been a good place to earn wages as a laborer and raise his family with a combination of manufacturing, building, or farm labor. We do know that the Virginias moved here sometime in the 1820's and left in the 1830's. It is very possible that the disastrous freshet of 1830 washed away William's employment along with all the businesses on the river. This in turn may have prompted the move to Moriah, NY. More research is needed...it's hard to even speculate about how it was to live in an all-white community of mostly poor farmers and no information has come down to us from contemporary accounts or diaries. We can only surmise from the known outcome that New York may have provided more opportunities for William to support his growing family.



**Jeremiah Virginia's** story doesn't end without several twists. He appears to have had some wanderlust most of his life, and even in later years may have followed his children to New York to live with them for brief periods. His War of 1812 pension was actually a one-time payment paid to a Hampton Lovegrove of Fairfax, Vermont by the legislature for Jeremiah's "use and benefit" in "consequence of an injury received at Plattsburgh, on the 11<sup>th</sup> of September, 1814". His Revolutionary War pension was for life (\$50. per year). A recent article by William Powers in the Sun Community News (Lake George, NY region) has more details of Jeremiah's unlikely escape from bondage and exploits as a soldier in the later years of the American Revolution.

There is also a bizarre story involving Jeremiah's oldest son Luther Virginia. Luther moved back and forth from lower Canada and St. Albans, where he had work in a tavern. After an argument with a white patron, Luther left the tavern premises in St. Albans but waylaid his opponent just out of town and beat him to death. Luther was quickly apprehended and tried by the Vermont Supreme Court, who convicted him of first-degree murder and sentenced him to death. A month later, Luther was hanged by the county sheriff and became the only man ever executed by the state in Franklin County. There is an account of the details in the St. Albans town history which made it into Abby Hemenway's Gazetteer in the 1880s(10). So, as the reader can see, this one family with a brief connection to Essex had experiences tying them to several important and even tragic events happening in Vermont during their lifetime. We are obviously a more diverse community today but it took many years to slowly increase our population of people of color and the trend toward more diversity will surely continue in the near future.

#### FOOTNOTES:

- 1) Family search.org (free). US Census Records, Essex, Vermont 1790-1870 (9 Records)
- 2) "The Problem of Slavery in Early Vermont 1777-1810", Harvey Amani Whitfield. Vermont Historical society, 2014
- 3) Family Search.org, US Census Records, Essex, Vermont, 1830
- 4) Family Search.org (free). US War of 1812 Pension Records, index to pension application files, 1812-1910
- 5) "Jeremiah Virginia: From Slave to Patriot in Vermont". William Powers, article in Sun Communitynews.com, Lake George, NY. May 31, 2020 (available online)
- 6) "Montpelier's Treasures—the Legacy of Thomas Waterman Wood. T.W. Wood Gallery and Arts Center, Montpelier, Vt. 2008, p.21
- 7) Moriah, New York. Wikipedia.org search, history of..
- 8) Family Search.org (free). US Census Records, Rome, NY, 1850
- 9) Findagrave.com/memorial/13109810/William C. Virginia, Rome Cemetery, Rome, NY
- 10) Vermont Historical Gazetteer, Abby Maria Hemenway. Volume IV, 1882, Town of Swanton in Franklin County(available online)

#### OUR ZOOM ANNUAL MEETING WAS A BIG SUCCESS.

We had members from all over the United States join us. Hawaii, Virginia, California, and Massachusetts. We hope to do some online programs in 2021 so please check our webpage and Facebook page for further information.



# ESSEX COMMUNITY HISTORICAL SOCIETY STATEMENT OF ACTIVITIES

October 2019- September 2020

## REVENUE

Dues	220.00
Book sales	80.00
Contributions	65.00
Town of Essex FY19 Budget	3500.00
Tales and Treasures	300.00
Interest income	68.03
Deaccession	
Water Tower	510.09

**TOTAL REVENUE 4743.12**

## EXPENSE

Echo Newsletter	560.75
Postage/PO Box	345.80
Vermont Historical Society Dues	50.00
Web page	66.75
Sing-a-long	137.58
Office supplies	54.60
Collection	50.00
Exhibits	
Insurance	667.00
Tales and Treasures	
Printing	7.95
Moving dolly	36.79
Books	582.74
Secretary of State filing	20.00
Trivia prizes	20.00
PastPerfect software	399.00

**TOTAL EXPENSES 2998.96**

## ACCOUNT BALANCES 9/30/20

General Accounts	
Checking	4069.94
Savings	655.90
Restricted Accounts	
Collection insurance (checking)	700.00
Echo (checking)	540.00
Postage (checking)	268.00
Tales and Treasures	1300.96
CD -- TD Bank (separate)	4794.20
1805 Schoolhouse Fund (savings)	577.00
Deaccession Fund (savings)	813.75
Water Tower (separate)	20330.23

**TOTAL CASH ON HAND 34,049.98**

### THANK YOU TO THE 2020 TALES AND TREASURES SPONSOR



Since the 2020 Tales and Treasures programs were cancelled due to COVID-19, this sponsorship will be credited to our 2021 Tales and Treasures. It is hoped that the programs cancelled in 2020 can be rescheduled for 2021. Watch the Spring 2021 Echo for more information.

# ESSEX COMMUNITY HISTORICAL SOCIETY BOARD OF DIRECTORS 2021

**President: Eva Clough (2020-2022)**

**Vice President: Tim Jerman (2020-2022)**

**Secretary: Jan Kilmer (2020-2022)**

**Treasurer: Ann Gray (2019-2021)**

**Jerry Fox (2019-2021)**

**Dylan Giambastista (2021-2023)**

**Denise Groll (2021-2023)**

**Chuck Willard (2021-2023)**

**Thad Wolosinski (2019-2021)**

Please take a look at your address label. The expiration date of your membership is noted. You can use the form below to update your membership.



## ESSEX COMMUNITY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

P.O. Box 8388 Essex, Vermont 05451

### Membership Form

**Please consider becoming a member or renewing your membership at this time.  
Or you can pass this on to someone who would like to become a member.**

**Your dues will help us add to our collection of Essex memorabilia, maintain the museum,  
publish the ECHO, and sponsor historical programs.**

\_\_\_\_\_ New member

\_\_\_\_\_ Renewal of membership

Name(s) \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address \_\_\_\_\_

Street \_\_\_\_\_

City, State, Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ Individual membership \$10.00

\_\_\_ Family membership \$15.00

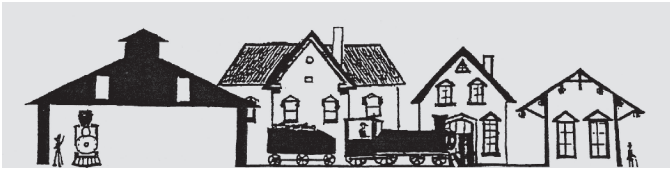
\_\_\_ Senior membership (60 and over) \$5.00

\_\_\_ Lifetime: individual, married, civil union \$100.00

**Make checks payable to the Essex Community Historical Society.**

**Thank You.**





ESSEX COMMUNITY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

P.O.Box 8388

Essex, Vermont 05451

**Due to the  
Coronavirus,  
we have had to  
cancel the  
Sing-a-long  
and tree lighting  
for  
this year.**

**We wish you all a  
Happy Holiday  
season.**

