The Backbone

A publication of the Backbone Ridge History Group of Schuyler, Seneca, and Tompkins Counties

BECAUSE HISTORY MATTERS

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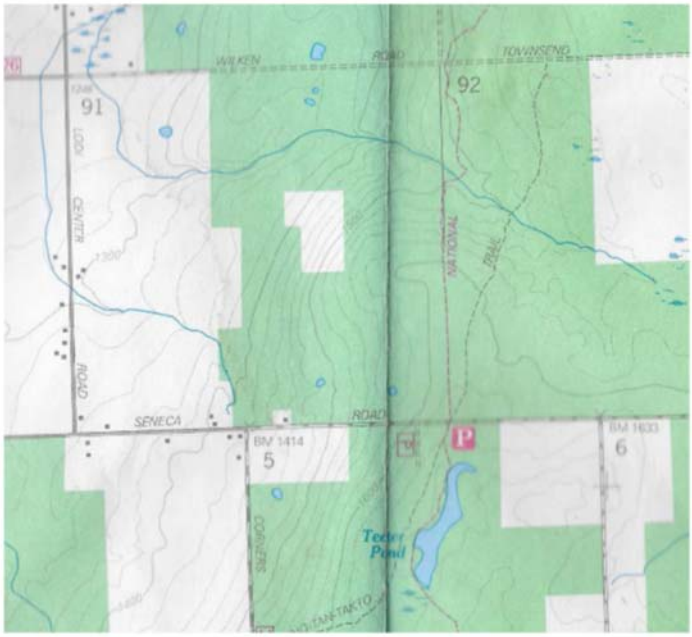
Backbone Ridge History Group
Presents

Walking the Military Lot Line



October 6, 2018 1-3PM

Gather at Teeter Pond Parking Area

¼ mile west from the intersection of Potomac and West Seneca Roads
Wear comfortable hiking shoes and be prepared to walk a rough trail.
RAIN OR SHINE
FREE

- Brief Military Tract History Presentation
- Resurvey a Lot Line using original 1789 Survey Notes and Equipment
- Walk the Line comparing 1789 vs. 2018 Landscape Observations
- Take Home Booklet – Personal and Landscape Histories of Military Lot 92

For Further Information email: abuddle42@gmail.com or call Beth Bevars at 912-755-2725
Financial Assistance provided by a generous grant from the Delavan Foundation.

Backbone Ridge News and Update's

By Allan Buddle

Cemetery Maintenance

Fall Cemetery maintenance to be at the Reynoldsville Cemetery beginning at 9 am on Friday and Saturday, October 12 and 13th

Bring some friends and weed wackers. All help much appreciated.

The Seeley Cemetery is being considered for work next spring. Suggestions are always welcome especially if they generate some interest in helping with the maintenance work.

Military Lot Boundary Transcriptions

A group of dedicated volunteers led by Robert Kibbee have been working for months transcribing the 1789 Survey Notes for the boundary of each of the 100 Military Lots in each of the Military Townships on and around the Backbone Ridge. They include Judy Butterfield, Rebecca Wright, Julie Morris, Charlotte Dickens, June Szabo and Beth Bevars.

The group meets bi-weekly to compare notes and measure progress. These transcriptions are leading to fully digitized and GPS located layers of history of each Military Lot accessible by smart-phone and computer.

MAIL BAG

In keeping with the Military Lot Project, Robert Kibbee provided an interesting letter written home in the late 1700s when the boundary line between Pennsylvania and New York was being surveyed. The letter probably accurately describes conditions encountered by the surveyors working on the Backbone Ridge.

The Eighteenth Century Backwoods Survey

It Wasn't Easy:

"June 7, 1785

The Morning was clear and promised us a favourable day but by noon the Rain began to fall very plentifully accompanied with Heavy Thunder- In our way to the Corner we aroused some find Deer- this part of this Country is not only Wilderness at present but must ever continue so- the Vallies are too small for Cultivation and the Hills too steep and high, and in short they are only separated by Crevices- their Tops are so narrow that frequently two Waggons would reach across.

We are much pestered with Muskeetoes and Knats the last are numerous beyond conception and we have no other way to keep clear of them but by making a Smoak- . . . we find by experience that Tobacco-Smoke is an excellent preservative against them – one Pipe will clear a whole tent- They are extreame small and tender the slightest touch crushes them to death- when we leave our Tents we have to muffle up our Faces and keep Gloves on our Hands in order to oppose their Attacks- The large Horse-Fly is very numerous and pleagues our Horses excessively- the poor Animals try to run into the Smoak of our Fires to get clear of them- Poison-Vine is in great abundance- my Hands are as completely blistered as if I had applied a plaster of canthherides- I cannot see anything in this Wilderness that can make it tolerably agreeable- This evening we discovered a mutiny among our People in both Camps but for prudential reasons did not give any intimation of the discovery-

Tough Terrain

Crude equipment

Bugs

Poison Ivy

Mutiny!

Chain	= 66ft. (80 chains to a mile)
Pole	=16.5ft (4 poles to a chain)
Link	=7.95in (100 links to a chain)

This is from a letter of David Rittenhouse to his wife written when he and Simeon DeWitt were surveying the Pennsylvania/New York boundary in 1785.

Digging into the National Archives

by Dr. LouAnn Wurst, Michigan Technological University

After almost twenty years of researching the farms on the Hector Backbone, I finally had the chance to do a different kind of digging: into the National Archives at College Park, Maryland. Most of the documents are official government records related to the Land Utilization Program of the Resettlement Administration, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the Work Projects Administration. And while I still have a lot of work 'sifting' through these records, I did find a copy of the project proposal for the Hector Land Use Adjustment Project, authored by Lyman O. Bond, the resettlement administration's regional coordinator, dated July 25, 1938 as well as a supplement to the final plan for New York's Land Use project A-1 which includes part of the Hector Backbone dated September 13, 1935. The most important part of this supplemental plan is that it includes many photographs of the proposed land acquisitions, including several of the farms that we have excavated over the years. I will share a few of this photos here, and follow up with more in coming newsletters.

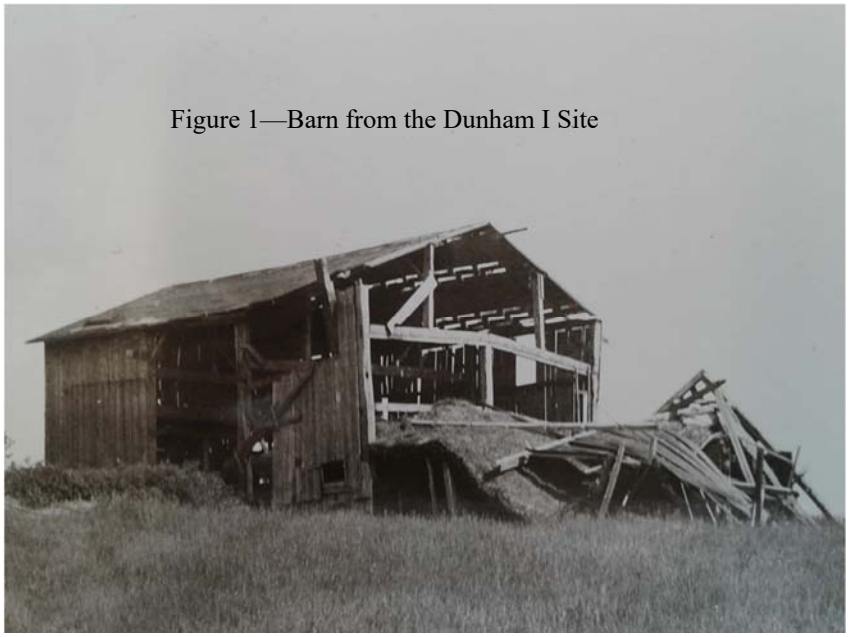


Figure 1—Barn from the Dunham I Site

One photo shows the barn on the Dunham I Site, located on the east side of Burnt Hill Road at the intersection of the Finger Lakes Trail. This barn was built by Jesse McNish after he purchased the farm in 1864. This photo is particularly eerie since on July 25, 1878, the Watkins Express reported that "a man by the name of McNish in the town of Hector committed suicide by hanging himself" in the barn "when evidently in a condition of temporary insanity." After his death, Sylvester Dunham purchased the farm and it stayed in their hands until it was bought by the Resettlement Administration in 1937. The caption on the photo reads "Minor Dunham, unoccupied and abandoned, not worked in 10 years, has Federal Land Bank mortgage." Minor Dunham and his wife Elsie were living in Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio at the time of the sale.

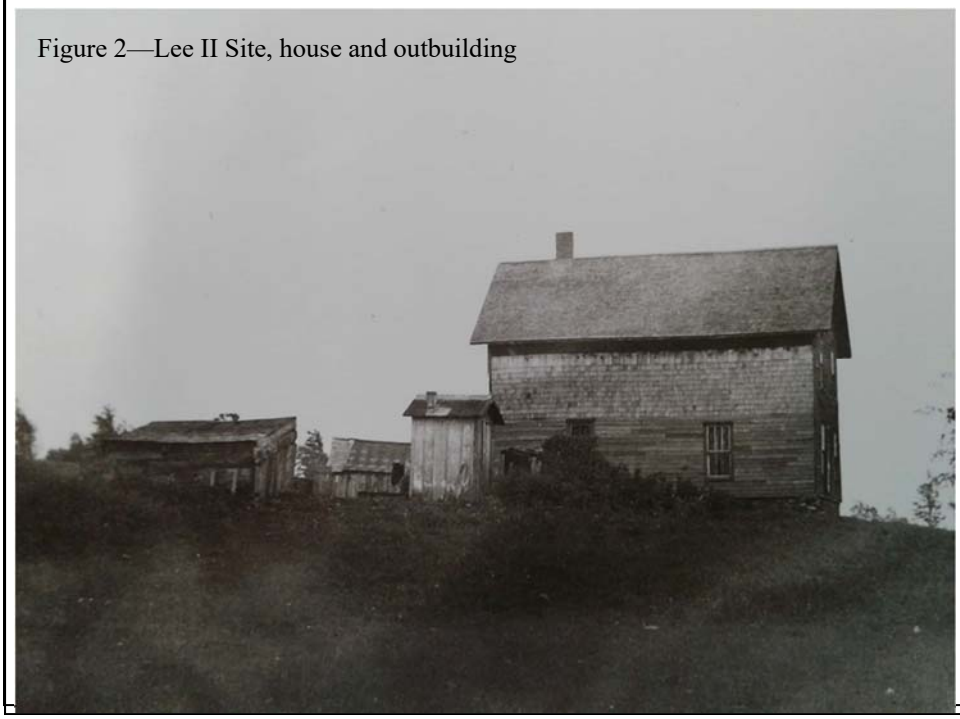


Figure 2—Lee II Site, house and outbuilding

The report also included a series of photographs from the Lee Farm, the first site that we excavated. They include a copy of the original illustration of the Daniel Lee farm included in the 1879 History of Schuyler County, perhaps to demonstrate how rundown the farm had become over the years. Another photograph shows the Lee II house and outbuildings, built by Lewis Mattison about the time of his marriage in 1895, on the east side of Burnt Hill Road. The caption for this photo reads "Frank Mattison, owner, Theodore Mattison, operator, house and buildings on above farm occupied and small acreage crop" (Figure 2).

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Digging Into the National Archives

by Dr. LouAnn Wurst, Michigan Technological University

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Figure 3—Dug out barn on the Lee Farm

One final photo of the Lee Farm was included in this supplemental report, showing a fairly bizarre barn (Figure 3). The caption reads "picture shows dug out barn with manure pile at entrance. Occupants of the barn—2 work horses and 2 cows." Our work at the Lee II house site never identified a barn, so we assumed that the Mattison's continued to use Daniel Lee's original barn located across the road. This photograph suggests a different scenario. The configuration of stones at the entrance to this "dug out barn" matches the basement entrance to Daniel Lee's house shown in the illustration from the 1879 History of Schuyler County (Figure 4). We excavated a unit in the cellar of this structure and discovered a heavy lens of charcoal and ash just above the paved stone floor indicating that the house had burned and the foundation may have been repurposed as a barn. It is also possible that this curious barn was located in the foundations for the original barn itself. The Watkin's Express for June 26, 1890 reported that "Mr. Lewis Mattison, whose barn was recently destroyed by fire, contemplates rebuilding soon." This photo would suggest that they were never able to rebuild, and continued to use this make-shift barn for the remainder of the occupation of the farm.

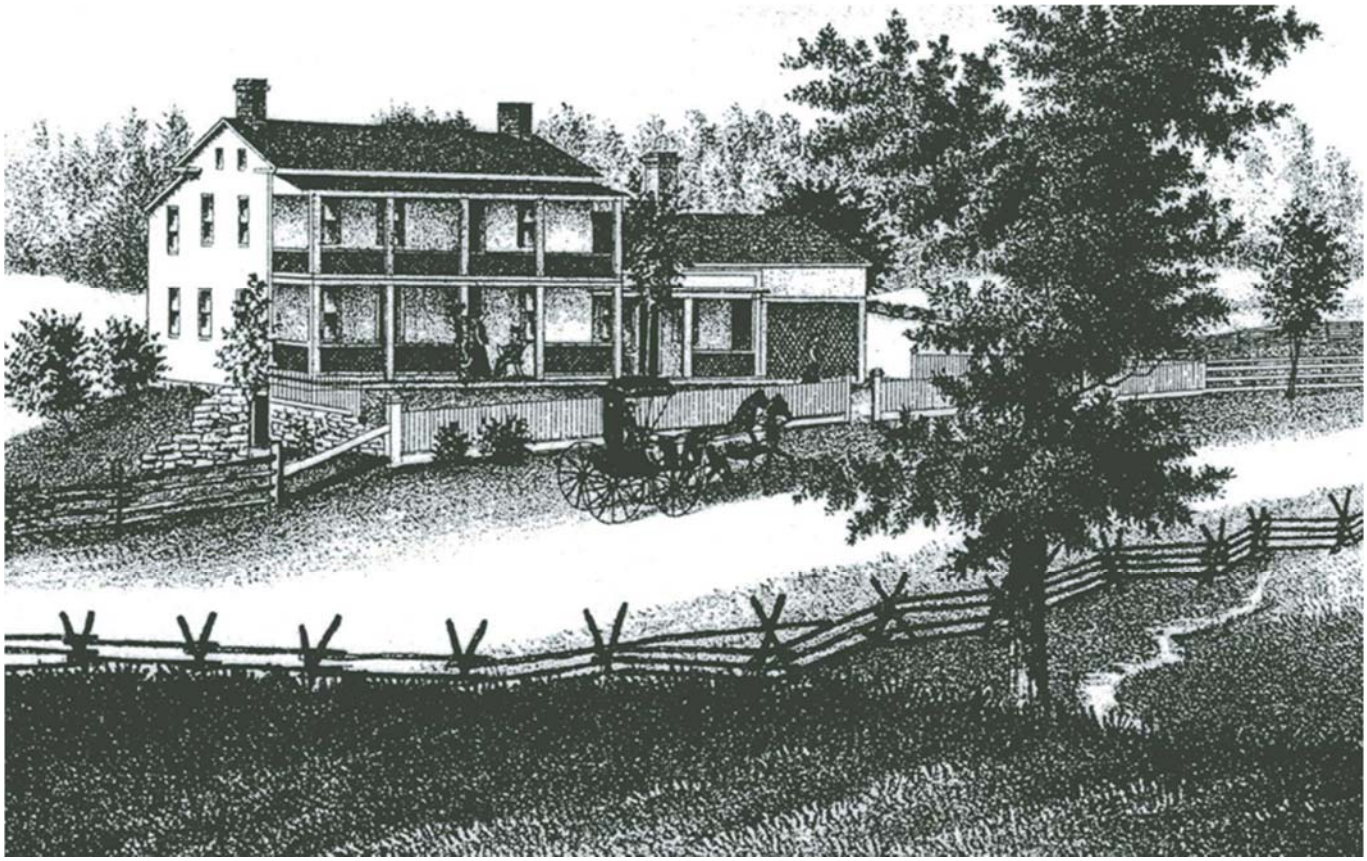


Figure 4—Detail of Daniel Lee's house from the 1879 History of Schuyler County

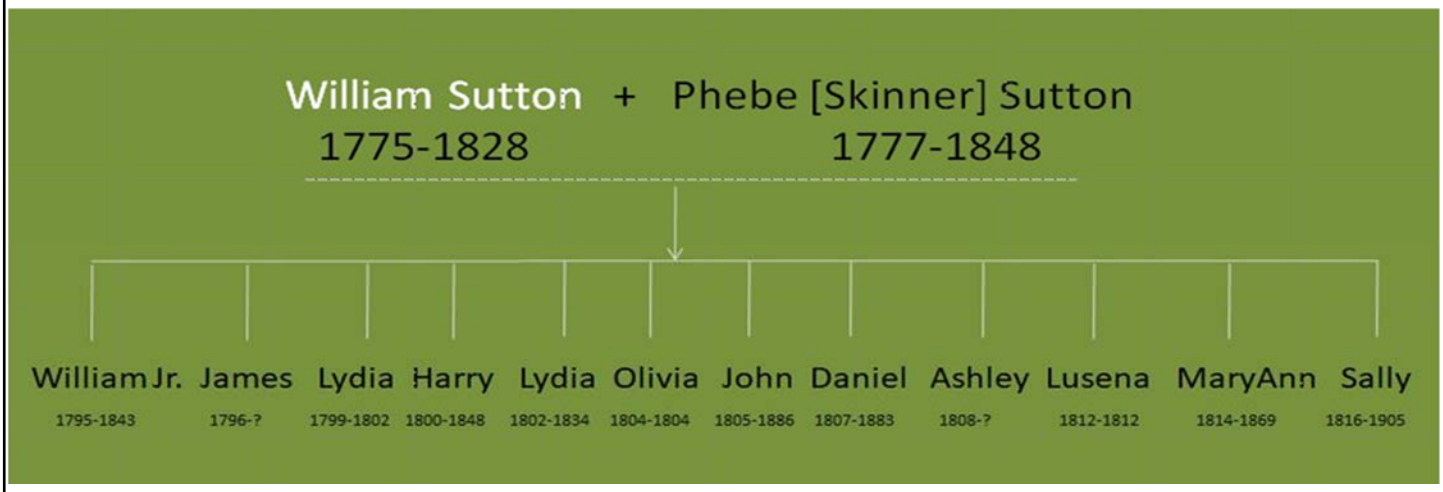
William Sutton—Stone Merchant, Stone Engraver

A Brief Sketch by Patt Dietlin

February 20, 1775 marks the birth of William Sutton to parents James and Sarah [Hooker-Smith] Sutton. Though not the firstborn son, William was the first surviving male child in the Sutton family. His birth took place in Jacobs Plains, Pennsylvania on the east side of the Susquehanna River, just north of Wilkes Barre. William joined two older sisters: Polly, born at White Plains, New York on September 30, 1770 and Deborah, who had been born at North Castle, New York on February 8, 1773. Between these two confinements, a son had been born March 2, 1772. This un-named child failed to thrive and passed from life the following morning.

Born into a tumultuous time, the first decade and a half of William's life saw the family relocate no less than a half a dozen times. Within a year of William's arrival, the Sutton family removed to the western side of the Susquehanna River to Exeter, Pennsylvania. Two years hence, the family would seek refuge in Forty Fort, a garrison seven miles downriver, as the British and their Indian allies moved along the river, slaughtering settlers and burning properties. At the surrender of the Fort, after the Wyoming Massacre, the Sutton family would flee some eighty miles downriver on a crude raft to Middletown, Pennsylvania where they remained for almost two years before journeying back to Wilkes Barre, Kingston, and finally, Exeter.

By the time he was fifteen (1790), William was working in Black Walnut Bottom (about forty miles upriver from Exeter), in the company of Jared Smith, a known stone mason. William also had business dealings with Ebenezer Skinner, a tavern owner at Skinner's Eddy. Before the turn of the century, William had acquired property and was a half owner of a sawmill built on a parcel of land owned by Mr. Skinner. On August 4, 1794, William married Ebenezer's third oldest daughter, Phebe. The following spring, April 3, 1795, saw the birth of William and Phebe's first son (William Jr.). A second son (James) followed in December of 1796 and a daughter (Lydia) was born on March 6, 1799. The next child that was born to the couple (Harry) was on December 26, 1800 in Ovid, New York.



In their book, **History of Seneca County**, Everts, Ensign and Everts note that "William Sutton early followed the trade of stone engraving. The stones were dark cobblestone and were taken from the west side of Seneca Lake." It was not long before grey sandstone/schist gravestones began to appear in between the lower ends of Cayuga and Seneca Lakes, all bearing a similar shape and format. Besides a rectangular stone, two other shapes began to consistently appear. The first was a rounded top with sloped shoulders that capped off the rectangular body of the stone. The second shape incorporated a rounded epaulet on each shoulder. The flat face of the stone usually had an incised border that created a rectangular area for the inscription. The font that William used for engraving was slightly italicized. Also unique to the stones that William Sutton engraved was the use of clovers in his designs in the top area of the stones, and a curious, scrolled number 7 that didn't seem to match the rest of the font.

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William Sutton—Stone Merchant, Stone Engraver

A Brief Sketch by Patt Dietlin

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Footstones were usually rounded at the top and had an incised border surrounding the initials of the deceased.

All told, the country stones cut and carved by William Sutton were simple and pleasing to the eye. William never signed his stones, and- in fact - it seems that engraving was not the main thrust of his work. He was not only a stone cutter and engraver, but also a stone merchandiser. He began selling cut stones to other engravers as blank stones or with some decoration and incised borders already carved in, leaving the stone ready to be inscribed.

William worked in Ovid for over ten years. As time passed, his sons grew into the business. Within a decade, hundreds of stones fashioned from the Sutton family workshop were dotting the countryside between the Lakes and beyond. Stones, with epitaphs carved by the Sutton men, or blank stones procured from the workshop by localized carvers such as E. B. Smith, D. Booth or J. Benson can be found from Ovid, south across the Backbone Ridge, and east and west across Cayuga and Seneca Lakes It would be fascinating to know how these men interacted with each other and conducted business. Did they have more than a passing knowledge of each other? Did they share workshop space? Did they compete for clients?

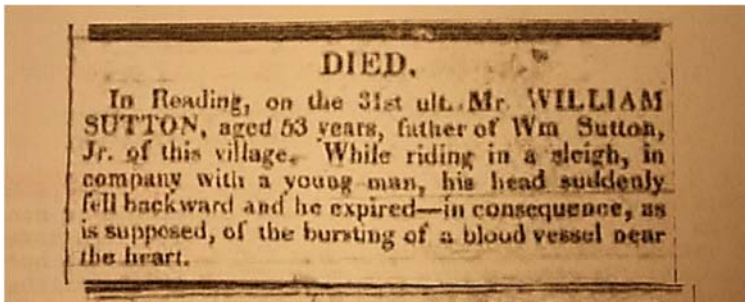
William Sutton—Stone Merchant, Stone Engraver

A Brief Sketch by Patt Dietlin

(continued from page 6)

Interestingly, many of William's clients were of Methodist persuasion and also had roots in Pennsylvania. It is curious to note that in 1788, William's sister, Deborah, had a religious conversion and later wrote in her journals that most of her family came under the spell of Methodism at that time. Whether William was still in the household when this occurred is unknown. Anning Owen, circuit rider and early preacher at the Asbury Church in Lansing was originally a blacksmith in the Kingston/Exeter area pf Pennsylvania. Family ties created a web; names such as Morehouse, Conger and Skellenger, all related by marriage, have gravestones fashioned by William in various cemeteries in between the lakes. Husbands and wives, decades apart in death are joined by the Sutton workshop. In the Old Covert Cemetery, the stone of Sarah Smith (d. 1806) was carved by William. Her stone stands next to an identically shaped stone carved for her husband Stephen (d. 1825). That Stephen's stone came from the Sutton workshop would seem a sure thing, it was nevertheless wrought by a different hand than William's. It could be the work of James or John, as it bears characteristics to their work.

William relocated his family sometime between the death of his daughter Lusena (d. January 26, 1812 in Ovid) and the birth of daughter Maryann (b. January 23, 1814 in Reading). It was from here on the west side of Seneca Lake that the business expanded and became more diversified as William's sons came into their own. William Jr., James and John all engraved stones and the works of their hands became distinct from that of their father as well as from each other. (Signed examples of their works are documented and will become the subject of future newsletters.) For well over a decade, the stone cutting and engraving business continued to flourish. By the end of December, 1826, William Jr., James, John, Daniel, and Lydia had married and were out of the familial home. This left Harry (26), Ashley (18), Maryann (12), and Sally (10) still at home with William and Phebe. The workshop now had satellite locations; William Jr. was living in Seneca (working in Geneva), John abiding in Milo (working in Penn Yan) and James living next door to his parents, working in the Reading shop. Besides delivering stones via wagon, the Suttons made use of the lake and delivered their products via sloop.



DIED,

In Reading, on the 31st ult. Mr. WILLIAM SUTTON, aged 53 years, father of Wm Sutton, Jr. of this village. While riding in a sleigh, in company with a young man, his head suddenly fell backward and he expired—in consequence, as is supposed, of the bursting of a blood vessel near the heart.

Death came abruptly for William on January 30, 1828. The brief obituary in the Geneva Gazette speaks to the swiftness of the event.

Fittingly; it would be a father's son – John - who carved the gravestone.

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We hope that information contained in the Backbone continues to be of interest and we welcome suggestions for content related to the history of the Backbone Ridge and surrounding communities. Please feel free to contact us with suggestions or contributions of articles by mail at the address above or through the website at that address above.

For new or renewal memberships, for an individual or household please send $10 to BRHG, PO Box 62, Trumansburg, NY 14886