

# ELIJAH RISLEY

*CONTINENTAL SOLDIER -- PIONEER*

*Hartford CT - Cazenovia NY - Fredonia NY*

**1757 - 1839**

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## **ELIJAH RISLEY, SR.**

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Elijah Risley, Sr., was a fifth generation American (Richard, Richard, Jonathan, Moses), a descendant of one of the original founders of the Commonwealth of Connecticut who arrived in Massachusetts in September 1633 on the ship "Griffin" with Rev. Thomas Hooker and moved from Newtowne (Cambridge) with Hooker's group to settle Hartford, CT, in May 1636.

Elijah was the sixth of ten children. He grew up in Hockanum, CT, which is now East Hartford, and was baptized in the First Congregational Church there.

Elijah Risley, his father Moses, an older brother Moses, Jr. and two younger brothers, Allen and David, were all soldiers in the American Revolution. According to his application for pension under the Revolutionary Claims Act, 18th March, 1818, he enlisted first in Hartford, CT, in July 1775 (age 17) in the Eighth Regiment under Col. Jedidiah Huntington, serving until expiration of its term of service, 10 December 1775. [Connecticut records indicate that this regiment "was stationed on the Sound until Sept. 14, when on requisition from Washington, it was ordered to the Boston Camps and took post in Roxbury in Gen. Spencer's Brigade."]

In March 1776 he enlisted again at Hartford, this time in the 22nd Continental Regiment under Col. Samuel Wyllys, and was in the battle at Flatbush on Long Island, NY, 27 August 1776. He also spent four weeks on board the vessel "Spitfire" as a volunteer from the army and was in an engagement with five British vessels in Tappen Bay, NY, and assisted in boarding one of their tenders. His company was broken up and he was discharged at the hospital in Stamford, CT, in January 1777 with 8 days rations to go home. [CT records: "After the evacuation of Boston by the British, this regiment marched under Washington to New York (by way of New London and the Sound), and remained in the vicinity from April to the close of the year; assisted in fortifying the city; ordered to the Brookyn front Aug 24; engaged in the Battle of Long Island Aug 27; in retreat from New York Sept 15; present with the army at White Plains, Oct 28; remained under General Heath until expiration of term of service, Dec 31, 1776."]

He then re-enlisted at the end of March at Glastonbury, CT, in the company commanded by Capt. Isaac Goodrich and served one tour in the Militia, followed by a tour in the Quartermaster's Department of the Continental Army under Col. Jeremiah Wadsworth where he served until his company was discharged 1 January 1779.

Elijah married Phoebe Bill, daughter of John and Irene (Swetland) Bill in Hartford soon after finishing his service in the Army. Their first child, Philene, was baptized in the First Congregational Church in East Hartford, 17 December 1780, followed by Betsey (bapt. 6 October 1782) and Horace (bapt. 3 July 1785). Some time after the birth of their fourth child, Elijah, Jr., 7 May 1787, the family moved to Cazenovia, Madison County, NY, where he acquired land in Cox's patent and erected a brick house in the forks of the road from Cazenovia to Morrisville.

Their daughter Fanny was born there on 15 May 1793, followed by two sisters, Phoebe and Sophia, and two brothers William and Levi, the youngest, who was born 14 June 1804. The four youngest were all baptized at the First Presbyterian Church of Cazenovia on 10 February 1807, in preparation for the forthcoming move west.

His business in Cazenovia failed in 1806 when, under contract to build the Cherry Valley Turnpike from Cazenovia to Morrisville, he unexpectedly ran into a quicksand swamp. His son Elijah is reported to have said to him, "Father, let us all go to the Holland Purchase. We boys will stand by you and help you carve out a home in the woods." In September 1806, he and his oldest son Horace, then 21, went to the Holland Land Company office in Batavia and contracted for two lots to the south of Cattaraugus Creek. In March 1807, at age 50, he and his wife and children ages 3 to 27 gathered their belongings and supplies, and departed from Cazenovia by ox team.

After a two day stop in Buffalo at a tavern kept in a log house, they came on the ice down Lake Erie as far as Cattaraugus Creek, then overland an additional 15 miles or so to where the ancient Indian trail, the Buffalo Creek-Presque Isle road (Buffalo to Erie) forded Canadaway Creek. Here, Hezekiah Barker had taken over the land and log cabin built by Thomas McClintock, and it served as an inn for travellers and new settlers. The family stayed here while Elijah built his first log house on the West Hill.

Horace Risley said that his father had brought with them a bundle of little apple trees from Utica or New Hartford on horseback and that he gave him and Elijah each one and the rest were put out on the Buckingham farm which the senior Risley then occupied -- and this was the source of the Risley apple, well known in those parts for many years.

Building a house was first priority for any new settler. Although timber abounded in the forest, it was no mean task to fell the trees, cut the logs, gather them at the site, notch the ends for interlacing the logs at the corners, build up the walls and then add a roof of elm or basswood bark, or split basswood logs hollowed and overlapped to carry off the rain. Space for a door was cut in after the wall was up. Doors were made of split logs smoothed with an axe and fastened together with pins, not a nail being used in the house. Many of the cabins had split log flooring across the top of the walls to provide a small upper "chamber room" sleeping space reached by means of a ladder.

Elijah's son William described how his father built one of these log houses, but to save splitting and smoothing the logs for the floor, some large flat stones from the creek were procured, so that two stones formed the floor for the end of the house. There was no chimney, so he made a hole in the roof over these stones to let out the smoke. When the fire was built on the stones, they began to crack and pieces began flying in all directions, driving everybody out of the house. Subsequently a stick chimney was made over the fireplace, plastered with clay to protect it from fire.

All of the land in this area was owned by the Holland Land Company (roughly the eight counties of Western New York) which sold land on a contract basis, retaining title to the land until the contract was fulfilled. (New settlers with cash usually pushed on into Ohio where they

could buy government land at \$1.25 an acre, compared to \$2.50 an acre here, "but with what seemed like eternal trust" terms from the Holland Land Company.)

In 1809, Elijah Risley built the first bridge across Canadaway Creek, the main road up till then having to go south of the settlement where the creek could be easily forded. He also built both a grist mill and a saw mill on the west side of Canadaway Creek. These were followed by the construction of the first store in Chautauqua County, a small grocery, by Elijah Jr., who came to be known as the first merchant in the County. Elijah Jr. also operated one of the first asheries in the area.

The first priority activities for the new pioneers, after providing shelter and protection for family and livestock, was to clear land and obtain sustenance. Initially they depended on such food as could be supplied by "the chase" and planted potatoes and corn on the first land to be cleared -- also turnips, if space allowed. Then they worked mightily to clear a larger tract of land by Fall in order to sow Winter wheat. Zattu Cushing, one of the first settlers before Elijah, brought with him a bushel of apple seeds so as to start an orchard as soon as his land was ready. The raising of flax was also begun early.

Money was scarce and most trade was by barter, with farmers usually getting low value for their crops and the merchants high values for their wares. Taxes had to be paid in cash. Timber produced in clearing the land turned out to be the principal cash crop for these early settlers. One of the first "industries" was the conversion of lumber to ashes and "black salts." Neighbors gathered from miles around with their teams for a "logging bee," pulling cut timber to big piles for burning. The burned heaps of ashes were either sold to an ashery for six or eight cents a bushel, or converted into "black salts" in the field for easier transportation and a higher price. The ashes were leached and the lye boiled down to the consistency of thick mortar, then poured into 10-12 foot troughs and hauled to the ashery by oxen. The intense heat of the ovens in the ashery turned the black mass to a grayish color, pearly white when cool, called pearl ash. Pearl ash was used for cooking purposes where we would now use baking powder, and Montreal was the great market for ashes. Elizabeth Crocker, who wrote a weekly column "Yesterdays" for "The Fredonia Censor, and from whom much of this information comes, wrote, "Had it not been for the black salts, many settlers would have been unable to keep their land."

John Brigham, another Revolutionary War soldier who moved west after the war, had moved with his family from Marlborough MA to Fitzwilliam NH in 1790, where his youngest child Nabby was born in 1791, then to Madison NY in 1795, and finally to Chadwick Bay (now Dunkirk) where he took up a tract of wild land, built a log house and opened a farm. A principal street leading out of Dunkirk village, and first opened by him, still bears his name. His father Joel, who kept a public house in Marlboro for more than 50 years, and was a noted Whig, had moved to Madison, NY in 1783, and was living there with his son Jonathan when he died in 1797. Two of John's four children married children of Elijah Risley Sr.

Elijah's daughter Philena was married to Thomas Warren in 1809 in the Buckingham place where "Grandpa Risley" then lived in the best log house in town and probably the first one with stairs in place of a ladder to go to the second floor. In the fall of 1810, Elijah Jr. married "Nabby" (Abigail) Brigham, who came down from Dunkirk to Canadaway to become its first

school teacher.

Betsey, the second born, had married Seth Risley in 1804, which made Fanny Risley the oldest unmarried daughter, age 18, when Elijah Sr. decided to move west to Ohio with his family and son-in-law, Thomas Warren, to erect a distillery in the town of Parkman. Mother Risley was unwilling to go unless Fanny accompanied them or was married, however, so on 4 March 1811, Fanny married James Brigham, an older brother of her sister-in-law Nabby Brigham Risley. A few weeks later the family started for Ohio, and the newly-weds stayed behind to live with the Elijah Risley Jr's in Fredonia.

Elizabeth Crocker writes that Fanny Brigham is reported to have told the following story of life in Fredonia as she remembered it from her younger days to her son George French Brigham, then 34, when he was ill in 1861. (See the Fredonia Censor, Sept 1884.) It seems that some five months after the family left Fredonia, word came back that members of the Risley family in Ohio were sick and in distress. James and Fanny Brigham, just six months wed, started for Ohio on horseback in September. On their arrival they found Mother Risley, William, Thomas Warren, Sophie and Philene all ill with "bilious fever."

There was no one to care for them, except Elijah Sr. and young Levi, then six years of age. The doctor came 25 miles once in two weeks to call on them. Fanny Brigham decided to stay to care for the family and James Brigham returned to Fredonia on horseback, leading her horse. Later, in the winter of 1812, when the fevers had passed, Fanny returned to Canadaway with her parents. It was a trip of about 200 miles and one never to be forgotten. The critical point was crossing the Cuyahoga River, which had to be forded since there was no bridge.

Although the ice was strong enough to hold a man it would not support the horses, so Elijah Risley drew the sleigh across and Grandma Risley and Fanny walked behind. To get the horses over it was necessary to break the ice and then lead the horses through the water. Mr. Risley, of course, got very wet and extremely cold in the freezing water. His pantaloons were made of cotton velvet and underwear was not known in those days. His pants froze to him. He had tried to protect his feet by dressing them in a pair of Grandma Risley's stockings, and they too were turning icy.

After proceeding two miles beyond the crossing, the horses gave out and could no longer draw the sleigh in the snow and mud of the horrible roads. The roads had recently been cut out and the felled trees and logs lay in every direction. There was nothing to do but leave the sled. Since there was but one saddle it was put on the horse for Grandma Risley and Fanny rode bare-back. Grandpa Risley started walking. As the mud gathered and froze to his legs and feet he sank down exhausted. Becoming almost senseless he cried like a child.

Fanny went ahead for help and her horse would break through and go so deep that her feet would even extend into the mud and snow. She finally reached a tavern about three miles further along, where she was able to obtain help from men with an ox team who went to the rescue of Grandpa and Grandma Risley. In the morning they went back for the sleigh and continued on to Painesville, which was on their way home to Canadaway.

Apparently she was in good health after the Ohio trip, for Fidelio Williams Risley, the first of nine children of James and Fanny Brigham, was born that same year, on 5 December 1812.

Indians were a continuing threat in those times, as were the British, until the end of the War of 1812 and Commodore Perry's victory over the British fleet in Lake Erie. The "hungry year" of 1817 brought privations to many of the early settlers. The Erie Canal opened in 1825, which finally provided an avenue for their products of the soil to be sold in Eastern markets, and times became more prosperous for the settlers.

Elijah Risley's first petition for a Revolutionary War pension was filed with the court of the County of Chautauqua on 16 May 1818. He was then age 61. After citing his enlistments and his periods and places of service (see above,) he then went on to swear that he was "now in reduced circumstances and stands in need of his country's assistance for support..." On 4 September 1819, he was awarded \$8.00 per month commencing 16 May 1818, with arrears of \$125.18 and semiannual payments thereafter of \$48.00, but ending 4 March 1820 -- a total of \$173.18. This decision was confirmed on 7 February 1821, which brought Elijah back to the court again on 18 February 1823 with a new petition.

In his new petition, he again recounted his experience in the War, and certified that "I have not since that time [when the pension act was passed] by gift, sale or in any manner, disposed of my property or any part thereof, with intent thereby so to diminish it, as to bring myself within the provisions of the act ... and that I have not, nor has any person in trust for me, any property, or securities, contracts, or debts due to me; nor have I any income other than what is contained in the schedule hereto annexed by me subscribed -- and I do further swear and declare that the Inventory by me made and subscribed to the aforesaid Court, on the 30th June 1820 and a copy thereof sent to the War Department, intending to exhibit a true account of my estate, was incorrect in this that I then owed \$469.23 which was not stated or set forth in said Inventory, and all of my said Estate, except what is hereafter mentioned has been sold to pay as far as the same would go on said debts, since the said 30th June 1820, and there is now due and owing from me to my creditors not less than \$140 -- which I am wholly unable to pay, being insolvent, and further that I have no claim or title to the land mentioned in my said Inventory, as I then supposed. My family consists of myself and my wife, Phebe, aged about 62 years. My present occupation is the tending of a grist mill, but I am unable to do but little labor in consequence of a breacher [hernia or rupture?] which I have been afflicted a number of years, and I only assist occasionally in tending the mill. My wife is very infirm and unable to support herself. Were not for my children who are married and live away from me I should be dependent on the charity of the People for my support and that of my wife.

"My Estate is as follows, viz:

"I have no Real Estate whatever.

"Personal Estate: (Necessary clothing and bedding excepted.)

"1 small iron pan, one small dish kettle, 1 iron tea kettle, 1 small bake pan, 1 frying pan, 14 Gr Brass Kettle, 1 skillet, 1 doz. knives and forks, 2 wash bowls, 2 wood pails and other tin

pans, 2 iron basins, 1 earthen platter, 1 doz. earthen (indecipherable), 1 tea pot, 6 common spoons, cups and saucers, 1 sugar bowl, 1 enamel (indecipherable), 5 tea spoons, 4 old iron table spoons 1 old tin pail, 2 spinning wheels, 1 cow, 4 sheep, 2 shoats, 1 hoe, 1 Bible, 1 Psalm Book, 2 old tables, 1 candle stand, 6 old chairs, one Great Chair, one old spade given by my son, 1 small hammer, 1 gimblet, 1 pr. pincers, 1 chest, 1 (indecipherable) Box -- the whole being estimated by me at \$45.75. I have also hand saw, shovel and tongs and flat iron worth about \$3.00."

Elijah's wife, Phoebe, died 14 March 1825 in Fredonia at age 63, and Elijah died 11 January 1839, age 84. A 7 December 1846 court document states that, "At the time of his death he was a Pensioner of the United States under the Act of 18th March 1818; that he left no widow, but left the following named children him surviving, viz: Horace Risley, Elijah Risley, William Risley, Levi Risley and Fanny Brigham, the wife of James Brigham ..."

His second daughter Betsey had died in 1819, age 37, after 15 years of marriage. Phoebe, who married Philip Fellows, died in 1823, age 24. Sophia, who married George French, a Dunkirk merchant, died in 1831 at age 31 "after an illness of 24 hours." Philena Warren, the oldest child, died in 1833. Some idea of how close these children were to each other can be seen in the names Fanny gave her children: Philena Warren, 1816; Levi, 1824; George French, 1827; and her seventh child Sophia French, 1830.

Elijah Jr, William and Levi started their seed business in 1833, sending seeds all over the United States. The seeds went in wagons painted in bright colors and labelled in large letters on each side "RISLEY BROTHERS, GARDEN SEEDS, FREDONIA, N.Y." These wagons had a body shaped like a hearse and took out full loads. At every sizeable town they would leave a box containing an assortment of packaged seeds and the next year the storekeeper would pay for what he had sold and receive a fresh supply. The business proved highly profitable. When they sold out to U.E. Dodge and Co. in 1853, the three Risleys were the wealthiest men in Fredonia. "Unfortunately they caught the fever for buying real estate and erecting buildings in Dunkirk when the Erie Railroad was opened from New York City to Dunkirk in 1851 and the speculation was disastrous." Risley Street is still an attractive avenue in Fredonia today, and two of the three large Risley brothers houses are still standing with their stately Southern-style Doric columns fronting the verandas on each house.

Levi went on to Iowa. His great-great-granddaughter told Elizabeth Crocker that Levi gave apple seeds from his Shady Brook Farm to Johnny Applesseed whom he knew well. These trees were originally from the Risley Gardens, Fredonia.

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*Papers in the Barker Library of particular help were: Books I and V (1960, 1964) YESTERDAYS ...in and around Pomfret, N.Y. by Elizabeth L. Crocker; articles by William Risley in the 1871 "Fredonia Censor"; and a paper about the three Risley brothers by Louis McKinstry read at the 1915 annual meeting of the Chautauqua County Historical Society in Fredonia.*

*I hope new readers will find some of this history as interesting today as it was to earlier readers. How wonderful if there could be more "eyewitness" history about other forbears still to be uncovered!*

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