

Tribute to Betsy Bean Leavitt
Newport, Vermont, Wednesday, September 22, 2004

Tomorrow, at Reedsville Cemetery in Hatley, Quebec, Canada, we will place a memorial plaque honoring Betsy Bean Leavitt. Because we do not know her burial place, and because it seems appropriate, we will place the plaque on the grave stone that stands at the grave of her parents, Joseph and Betsy Rowell Bean.

Tonight we pay tribute to Betsy Bean Leavitt, and share the things we know of her. Sadly, there is so much we do not know, and hunger to learn. But here we will share what we have learned, so that tomorrow, as we honor her, there will be in our minds and our hearts, some understanding of who she really is.

Betsy Bean was born to Joseph and Elizabeth Rowell Bean, May 5, 1814 in Hatley, Quebec. The Beans were Sutton, New Hampshire people, who had come early to settle in Hatley. Elizabeth Rowell was the eldest child of the Thomas B. and Lydia Hawes Rowell family. Four of the children of this family married into the Jeremiah and Sarah Shannon Leavitt family.

With all the interweaving of the Leavitts and the Rowells, Betsy and Nathaniel would have been acquaintances. Six months after Nathaniel's first wife, Deborah Delano, died at age 37, leaving 6 children motherless, Betsy became Nathaniel's second wife.

One has to ponder the responsibilities that fell upon young Betsy Bean. Six children, the youngest, John, not quite two. Nathaniel Jr. was six and Flavilla three.

One has to worry, some, about the reception she received. She was almost a contemporary of Deborah's oldest daughter, Salena. Betsy was fifteen and a half years old. Salena was just three months short of thirteen. Roxanna and Caroline Elizabeth were eleven and ten, respectively.

Betsy came into the home as the new mother, the new wife. One hopes she was gladly received.

Soon there were three more children added to the already burgeoning household. Rosilla, the first child of Nathaniel and Betsy Bean Leavitt came

within the year. Two years later, Mary Jane was born. When Mary Jane was five, their son, Wire, was born.

Salena had married in 1834, when Mary Jane was three. But it was still the home of nine people. Perhaps extended family helped to ease the burden, for Nathaniel had nine brothers and sisters, whose homes were in the neighborhood. Betsy was one of eleven. Her father and mother still lived nearby, and surely some of her siblings.

But there were unusual stirrings in the homes of the Leavitt families. They had learned of a new religion. They had studied the doctrines and were convinced that it was the faith they had searched to find. Nathaniel was committed, as were his mother and his brothers and sisters. They made the startling decision to leave their homes of so many years, to go in search of the people who held the key to this new faith.

One wonders if Betsy embraced the idea eagerly, or if she accepted the decision because she loved Nathaniel. We cannot know. This we do know, the quest, which may have seemed a promising adventure, as they left, turned to a multi-faceted nightmare for the young mother. First the frightening illness, from disease bred in swamps and mires through which they would pass. Then the anguish of his death. And finally the reality of her situation, for their little group had taken a different route, and now she was alone, without the support of family or friends.

Betsy Bean Leavitt, twenty three years old, had with her the younger three of Deborah's children and her own three little ones. Roxanna, who might have been a strength to her, had gone ahead in another company. Salena and Caroline Elizabeth had stayed behind.

Her first thought was to return to the safety of home. Nathaniel Jr., now age fourteen, wanted to continue their original course, and by his own account, persuaded Flavilla and John to stay with him. The three of them were found by family members as they reached White Pigeon, Michigan, where Nathaniel had died. But Betsy, somehow, made her way back to Hatley and home.

Family and friends came to her aid. Her own condition was fragile. Her emotional strength must have been depleted. Physically too, she may have been frail. Economically, she would have been destitute.

We know little of Betsy, from the time she arrived back in Hatley. This we do know: She no longer had the strength to care for her little ones. Baby Wire, now nine months old, was taken by her first cousin, Betsy Bean Abbott and her kind husband, Hiram, who reared him to manhood as their own.

Rosilla, who would have been seven at their return, went to live with the Andrew Samuel and Hannah Metcalf Hodges family. She writes in her own history that she was reared by the Hodges from age seven.

We have only recently found Rosilla. Until a few months ago, we searched for her under the wrong name and she was a mystery. Consequently, the histories contain incomplete and erroneous information. With help of kind friends and enthusiastic assistance of Rosilla's descendants, we now have much more information about this first child, born to Betsy and Nathaniel Leavitt. We have undertaken a project to write her story, which will become a supplement to the history, and correct the errors.

But we will interject here, a few words about Rosilla:

Rosilla was brought up very well by the prosperous Hodges family. She learned household arts and much of refinement in their home. At age 18, she married Oscar McConnell, the only son of a prominent Hatley family. They had seven children, losing two of them. In 1862 they immigrated to Kansas, where two more children were born. They homesteaded land in Kansas and reared their large family, most of whom stayed in Kansas and Oklahoma. Our recent contacts with their families have been wonderful. They have provided us with much information, photographs, a small history of Rosilla, and great excitement for their own connection with their Leavitt family, of whom they had known nothing.

Who it was that brought up Mary Jane, we do not really know. We suspect that family members helped with her care. The family of Nathan and Anna Leavitt Rowell probably figured into her life, because their children are known to have had a long association with her. Her half sister, Salena, was probably an influence, because her children were part of Mary Jane's life for the rest of their lives.

Mary Jane married one of the sons of the Hodges family who reared Rosilla. So it is possible that they took two of Betsy's children. We simply do not know.

Recently there has surfaced an inkling that Betsy may have married again. But the research is still not definitive enough to mention it just yet.

And so, Betsy, we wonder about you. Our hearts ache to think of you, your trials, your disappointments, your anguish. We long to say to you, "There, there, it will one day be better." But then you know that now.

We shall place a memorial plaque at the grave of your parents, honoring you and acknowledging them. Perhaps that simple act will symbolize that everything will, one day, be better. For even now, we feel a new and vital closeness to you, our Betsy Bean.