

The Risleys and Their Homes in Fredonia

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Elijah Risley, Senior was born in 1757 in Hockanum (now East Hartford) Connecticut. After serving in the Revolutionary War from 1775 to 1779, he married **Phebe Bills** with whom he had twelve children, nine of whom survived to adulthood: **Philena Risley**, b. December 1780, m. **Thomas Warren**; **Betsey Risley**, b. October 1782, m. **Seth Risley**; **Horace Risley**, b. July 1785, m. **Harmony Rood**; **Elijah Risley, Jr.**, b. May 1787, m. **Nabby (Abigail) Brigham**, fall 1810; **Fanny Risley**, b. May 1793, m. **James Brigham**, March 1811; **Phoebe Risley**, m. **Philip Fellows**; **Sophia Risley**, m. **George French**; **William Risley**, b. December 1802, m. **Caroline Patrick** 1828; and **Levi Risley**, b. 1805, m. **Sophia Ann Darling**, December 1832.

The family had moved to Cazenovia, Madison County at some time after **Elijah Risley, Jr.**'s birth, where **William Risley** and **Levi Risley** were born. **Elijah Risley, Sr.** had a business failure there while he was building the Cherry Valley Turnpike and was prompted by **Elijah Risley, Jr.** to move to western New York. They left in March and arrived in Canadaway in April 1807, staying with the **Hezekiah Barker** family in the **McClintock** log cabin for a week or so.

The Risleys put up a log cabin, referred to by them several times as a shanty, "on Chestnut Street where Berry Street later was opened," approximately 22 *Chestnut Street*. In an 1873 account, **Levi Risley** referred to the log hut "in which my father sheltered himself, wife and seven children." They must have been **Philena Risley**, **Elijah Risley, Jr.**, **Fanny Risley**, **Phoebe Risley**, **Sophia Risley**, **William Risley** and **Levi Risley**. (**Betsey Risley** was already married to **Seth Risley** and **Horace Risley** to **Harmony Rood**.) In an 1880 article, **Levi Risley** said they lived there for one and a half years.

Young's *History* and other standard sources say that **Elijah Risley, Sr.** contracted for parts of lots 32 and 33 in the 5th Township and 12th Range (a short distance out on West Main Street) in September 1806, although that first dwelling on Chestnut Street was on **Hezekiah Barker's** land. At some point in 1808 **Risley** built a substantial log house on Lot 33 on the north side of West Main Street. **Fanny Risley** later described it as "upon the hill on the **Buckingham** place . . . [the log house was] then the best one in town and I think, about the first one with stairs in place of a ladder to go to the second story."

Levi Risley in the 1880 piece describing what he remembered of Fredonia in 1821, referred to what **Fanny Risley** had called the Buckingham place (about at 257 *West Main Street*). He noted that on West Main Street, on the north side, the widow **Kapple** had built a house in 1815 "opposite to the **Hilton & Barlow** improvements." The **Kapple** place was roughly where **J. S. Higgins** is located on the 1881 map. "Next [came] a log house built by **Elijah Risley, Sr.** on a lot he entered in 1806. It was built in 1808 and burned about 1832. My home for two years." That was the "**Buckingham** place" which can be seen on the 1854 and 1867 maps of Fredonia. The "**Hilton & Barlow** improvements" refers to the large farm and the house set well back from the line of West Main Street, on the 1854 map marked "Mrs. **E. Hilton**," on the 1867 map "Mrs. **Cornwell**." This refers to **Emeline Hilton Cornwell**, wife of **Allen Hilton** and, after his death, wife of **Benjamin Cornwell**. On the 1881 map of Fredonia it is assigned to **E. Davis**.

Also in 1808, **Elijah Risley, Jr.** put up a small building, seven by nine feet in all, for a general store, the first in the Village, about at *136 West Main Street*. His sister **Fanny Risley**, then 14, was in charge. In the fall, he returned to New Hampshire to sell some family land, attended school there that winter, and returned early in 1809 with a supply of goods for the store. In April 1809 **Thomas Warren**, who was born in New Hampshire in 1787, came to Fredonia from Madison County where he must have known the **Risleys**. An 1809 jury panel listing of 1809 gives his occupation as “Distiller.”)

In 1809 **Fanny Risley** “walked out” with **James Brigham** supervised by **Elijah Risley, Jr.** and chaperoned by sister **Philena Risley**. **John Brigham** had also moved from New Hampshire in 1795 to Madison County, then to Dunkirk in 1808 with his wife, sons **James Brigham** and **John Brigham** and daughter **Nabby Brigham**.) In that same year **Barzillai Barker** married **Polly Marsh**, and soon after, **Philena Risley** married **Thomas Warren**. That wedding took place in the log house with stairs.

In the fall of 1810, **Elijah Risley, Jr.** married **Nabby Brigham**. For a few months they lived with her parents, then set up housekeeping “in a frame house about at *136 West Main Street*, which was but partly finished and stood in front of the old **Barlow** and **Hilton** place” which [*i.e.* the house?] **Elijah Risley, Jr.** then owned. “The house afterward was moved down street, now [1861] part of the old **Chauncey Tucker** house on the hill.” **Levi Risley**, in the 1880 article, located it this way: In 1821 the “**Richard Williams** Tavern” was at the corner of West Main and Chestnut streets, next a house of Mr. **Merritt**, a tailor, later occupied by the Rev. **David Brown**, and next the house **Elijah Risley, Jr.** had built in 1810 and which “first stood by the road side in front of the **Hilton & Barlow** house, and was moved to the present [1880] location in about 1816, and was afterwards removed [renovated?] by **C. Tucker** and occupied in late years by him.” This is a very confusing sentence. It may be intended to mean that in 1816 the building was moved to about *137 West Main Street* and was there in 1821, the focus of **Levi Risley’s** article, but at a later time was moved again by **Chauncey Tucker**. In 1816 **Chauncey Tucker** was only 11 years old. In April 1833 he married **Florella Risley**, the daughter of **Elijah Risley, Jr.** It may have been then that he moved into the old Risley house. Next the “**Chaney** or Dr. **Washburn** house [*143 West Main St.*] also built by **Elijah Risley, Jr.** in 1816 and occupied by him for four years.”

At some point after **Elijah Risley, Jr.** built his 1810 house on West Main Street, something happened that decided **Elijah Risley, Sr.** to try his luck elsewhere. He and his son-in-law **Thomas Warren** decided to move to Parkman, Ohio, and put up a distillery there. At the time **Fanny Risley** was 18 and, since it would have been unseemly for her to be left on her own, she had either to move to Ohio with her parents or get married. Therefore, **Fanny Risley Brigham** later said, “we were married in the spring of 1811 a few weeks before our family started for Ohio.” She and her husband, **James Brigham**, stayed with **Elijah Risley, Jr.**

The Ohio group came down with some kind of illness in the fall of 1811, so **Fanny Brigham** and **James Brigham** traveled there and “found Mother, **William**, **Thomas Warren**, **Sophia** and **Phoebe** all sick. No one to care for them but Mr. **Warren** [error for **Elijah, Sr.**?] and boy **Levi**, then 6.” She stayed to nurse them back to health while **James Brigham** returned to Fredonia. A week after she arrived, **Elijah Risley, Sr.** “and **Levi** were down with the same fever.” In the winter of 1811/1812 **Fanny** brought her parents back to Fredonia on a truly horrendous trip. However, **Levi Risley** wrote in 1884 that he had lived in Ohio for three years. “Started [back] in the spring of 1814 and arrived in May.” The wording suggests that his

parents had returned to Ohio again, after recovering from their illnesses while the **Warrens** had stayed in Ohio with **Levi** and **William**. When **Levi Risley** described that time of the fevers in the 1884 article, his version retained the blithe point of view of the six-year-old he had been: "All sick the first year but we all got well."

All was not well, however, with **Elijah Risley, Jr.** On 3 April 1812, the Hon. **Zattu Cushing**, First Judge of the Court of Common Pleas, formally discharged **Elijah Risley**, insolvent debtor. On 31 March 1812 **Cushing** had assigned the bulk of **Risley's** "estate" to his creditors: **Samuel Berry**, **James Hale** and **James Brigham**, which settled the claims. As **Fanny Risley** later described the incident, **Elijah Risley, Jr.** "kept a store until he formed a co-partnership with **James Hale** and then it was moved to a store they built on the east side [of the creek] and is now [1861] I think owned and occupied by the **Forbes** merchants." **Levi Risley** said the **Hale & Risley** store was built "in the war time of 1812, and was occupied by them some few years." It was occupied in 1821 by **W. Smith & Co.**, **Hale & Risley's** successors. The building stood about at today's *22 West Main Street*.

On 13 March 1815 **Israel Merritt** sold a one-acre lot to **James Hale** and **Elijah Risley, Jr.** on the northerly side of West Main Street. **Risley** sold his half interest to his father on 3 April 1816, apparently the lot to which **Elijah Risley's** 1810 home was moved in 1816. In that same year, 1816, **Elijah Risley, Jr.** built what **Levi Risley** referred to in 1880 as the "Dr. **Washburn** house." Its location is marked as "Mrs. **Washburn's**" on the 1867 map of Fredonia just west of *135 West Main Street*. This is the house where, **Levi Risley** added, **Elijah Risley, Jr.** lived for four years, *i.e.* to 1820. The 1820 Census seems to show **Elijah Risley, Jr.** still on West Main Street near **Orris Crosby** (*135 West Main Street*) and **Daniel Warren**, while **Elijah Risley, Sr.** is somewhere on Chestnut Street after **Adam Merrill** and **Hezekiah Turner**, but before **Joseph Humason** and **Nathaniel, Loren** and **Pearson Crosby**.

In 1818 **Elijah Risley, Sr.** had built a frame house on Chestnut Street "just down the creek from the old saw and grist mill of the **Risleys**." (Young's *History* says the mill stood about ½ mile below the Buffalo and Erie Road.) That is the location of the house (about at *297 Chestnut Street*) reflected in the 1820 Census, after **Hezekiah Turner** but before the **Crosbys** of Cordova.

In 1819 **Hale & Risley** were once again declared insolvent debtors leading to a Sheriff's sale on 20 November as announced in the *Chautauque Gazette* of 14 September 1819. It was after this that **Walter Smith** took over the store building at *22 West Main Street* and the business.

The assessment rolls for 1822 through 1824 show **Elijah Risley, Sr.** with some 16 acres (in Lot 20-6-12), Chestnut Street. It was in 1823 that the **Warren & Risley** brick distillery was built about where *285 Chestnut Street* is today. As **Levi Risley** located it in his 1880 article, between the old **Risley** mill and the 1818 house of **Elijah Risley, Sr.**

Levi Risley himself had left Fredonia by then. In December 1819 **William A. Hart** had begun his gunsmith business at the newly built Cascade Hamlet (today's *108 West Main Street*) and there **Levi Risley** apprenticed for two and one half years, living on the premises. He described it in an article in *The Fredonia Censor* of 30 July 1873. "I made the shop my castle night and day. It was a fine thing to have a bedroom away from all observers." After that, he worked, as he said, as a "boy clerk" in the old **G. W. French & Co.** store at Sinclearville in 1823. (This was the store owned by **Walter Smith** and **Levi Risley's** brother-in-law, **George French**, who had married **Sophia Risley**.) **Levi Risley** was not to return to Fredonia for ten

years. The 1830 Census is of some help in locating the other **Risleys**. By comparing the locations of the neighbors on either side, it is clear that in 1830 **Elijah Risley, Jr.** was still on West Main Street, with **Horace Risley** and **Elijah Risley, Sr.** on Chestnut Street, while **Thomas Warren** is somewhere near today's Forest Place.

In October 1832 **Elijah Risley, Jr.** advertised that he wanted some 50 to 100 acres cleared in the following year, a precursor to the beginning of the **Risley's** packet seed enterprise in which **Levi Risley** seems to have been a major investor. **Levi Risley** "of Warren, Pennsylvania" bought 90 acres on the west side of Canadaway Creek in October 1833 and another 150 acres from his brother **William Risley** in October 1834. **Elijah Risley, Sr.** died in 1839.

The 1840 Census is much less clear than the 1830 Census as far as locating the **Risley** brothers. **Levi Risley** had returned to Fredonia. There is no entry in the assessment rolls for him from 1831-1836 and the roll for 1837 is missing, so the earliest record of his return is that for 1838 which shows **William Risley** and **Levi Risley** with a $\frac{1}{4}$ acre lot, no location given, assessed at \$75, obviously a small house lot. Confirmation of the **Levi Risley** family's arrival in Fredonia is the birth of their daughter **Lucinda Risley** here in 1838. Her older sister, Alice Risley, had been born in 1831 in Pennsylvania.

There are no further entries for **Levi Risley** in 1839-1842. However, there is an entry for **Elijah Risley, Jr.** in 1839 for a $\frac{1}{4}$ acre lot assessed at \$330, perhaps the same location (14-6-12) with an improved structure on it.

The next assessment roll entry for **Levi Risley** is in 1843 at the "**Saxton House**" on 2 acres assessed at \$1,000. That is the brick building that stood in front of today's Fire Hall near the bridge on West Main Street. It was where E. Risley & Co., the family enterprise, was located in the 1850s.

After this date, the records are all together under the family's company name, **E. Risley & Co.** Until the Greek Revival mansions were built in the 1840s, there are no clear records of where the three brothers were living. **Elijah Risley's** house (*89 Risley Street*) and **William Risley's** house (*63 Risley Street*) were up, according to *The Fredonia Censor* of January 1845 "within the last two years" and **Levi Risley's** (formerly at *37 Risley Street*) later in 1845.

No doubt due to the influence of **Elijah Risley's** son **Hanson Risley**, who was a major force in getting the Erie Railroad to terminate in Dunkirk, the **Risleys** decided to leave the seed business and invested heavily in Dunkirk real estate. They leased the business and finally sold it to **Dodge** and **Hinckley** in 1851. At the same time, they kept their house lots on Risley Street, each on three acres. The 1854 map of Fredonia identifies the three residences.

Horace Risley had moved to Iowa in 1850. For some reason, according to the 1855 Census, **Elijah Risley** and his family were living on West Main Street again. Perhaps their Greek Revival mansion was undergoing renovation. **William Risley** and **Levi Risley** were still in their homes on Risley Street in 1855, but by 1860 **Levi Risley** too had moved to Iowa, where he lived for a number of years, ending his days in Chicago. His house at 37 Risley Street was sold, and in 1878 it was totally destroyed by fire.

Elijah Risley, Jr. had died on 9 January 1870 and his house was later occupied by his granddaughter, **Olive Risley Seward**, adopted daughter and traveling companion of **William H. Seward**. By 1884 the architect **William E. Beebe** had bought the home at *89 Risley Street*. **William Risley** remained at 63 Risley Street until his death on 1 September 1883. His widow,

Caroline Risley, and widowed daughter, **Julia Risley Lord**, lived there until 1895 when the property was sold to **Bradley Annis**, so that 1895 represents the last year in which anyone with a **Risley** surname resided in Fredonia.