

WHO REALLY WAS THE FIRST SETTLER OF COVENTRY VERMONT?



By Mark Mohrmann

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When Pliny White wrote his history of Coventry Vermont many years ago he got it right. Mostly. His book is the only history of Coventry that the town has been able to go to to understand the towns early history. In 1977 the Coventry Bicentennial Committee continued Pliny's work by publishing "Bits and Pieces of Coventry's History" which updated the towns story to the 1970's, but they still had to rely on Pliny's original work describing the early settlers who first came to the town.

Pliny filled five and one half pages of his book, published in 1859, with Coventry's origin story describing the arrival and settlement of the town by Samuel Cobb and his family from Westmoreland, New Hampshire in March of 1800. According to him this was the first settlement in Coventry. That is what is etched into Samuel Cobb's gravestone standing today in the Day Cemetery about a quarter mile south of the site of his original cabin. Writing decades after the fact Pliny relied on others to tell him that story. He also did not have access to contemporary documents that would have altered the story. Does Pliny's version of Coventry's first settlement hold up to careful scrutiny? Using a variety of primary sources that are available to us today a more accurate version or Coventry's origin story comes to light.



The Rev. Pliny Horton White

"About the year 1800, settlements were commenced almost simultaneously in several towns in Orleans County. With the exception of Craftsbury and Greensboro, no towns in the county had made any progress in population and several of them were entirely uninhabited. In that year, beginnings were made in Brownington, Morgan, Newport, Troy, and Westmore. In March of the same year the first settlement of Coventry took place. The pioneer settlers were Samuel Cobb and Tisdale Cobb, father and son: Samuel accompanied by his children, Samuel, Jr., Nathaniel, and Silence; and Tisdale by his wife. They came from Westmoreland, N. H., traveling on horseback as far as Brownington, which being the end of the road, they left their horses there, and made their way on foot through the dense woods, marking the trees as they went, till they reached the East part of Coventry. Samuel Cobb pitched on lot No. 11, now owned by Martin W. Davis, and built a log cabin directly opposite the present site of Mr. Davis's house. Tisdale Cobb pitched on lot No. 12, now occupied by Jesse Miller, and built a cabin just East of the present grave-yard ... By most diligent toil, in which all members of the families bore their parts, each man made a small clearing, in the season of 1800, and raised grain and potatoes enough to secure them from fear of actual want. Each family had a cow, which gained its living as best it could in the forest. It was the work of the younger girls to find the cows at night and drive them home, oftentimes a laborious task, requiring them to search the woods for miles around. To provide for the cows during the winter was a problem of no easy solution. No hay was raised, but a scanty supply was brought from Barton, and with the help of browse, which was abundant and close at hand they were comfortably wintered. So ended the first years of the infant settlement."

-- Pliny White, A History of Coventry, Orleans County, Vermont



Samuel Cobb gravestone, Day Cemetery, Coventry, VT.

This is the origin story for the town of Coventry as recorded in 1859 by the Reverend Pliny Holton White in his book "A History of Coventry, Orleans County, Vermont". Uncovering the origin story is probably one of the most important tasks to undertake when researching the history of a town. People want to know, who were the early settlers? Why did they come here, and where did they come from? The desires and abilities of these early immigrant settlers helped shape the nature of the towns we live in today.

Of course the real original indigenous occupants of the land were the Abenaki people who had been settled here for millennia. Abby Maria Hemenway tells us in the Vermont Historical Gazetteer that East Charleston and Barton in particular were sites of vigorous Abenaki settlement. Archeologists have uncovered in Coventry evidence of an Abenaki campsite along its shore on South Bay. The European colonists pushed northwards from southern New England and the Abenaki people succumbed to disease, retreated into Canada and melted away into the Vermont forests. By the time the first American settlers arrived there were scattered contacts with Abenaki people who were no longer permanently settled in organized villages on the land.

As the new American towns developed it became a particular badge of historical honor for a town to declare who was its "First Settler". Pliny White, the unofficial early historian of Coventry, awarded that honor to Samuel Cobb and his family. As a future president of the Vermont Historical Society Pliny White was very serious about Vermont's history. He was one of the nineteenth century champions of preserving the history of our towns and more importantly, telling their stories. In 1859 he was the newly-installed head of the Congregational Church in Coventry and he took it upon himself to write what has become the definitive history of the early years of the town.

Anyone wanting to further Pliny's work on this history has faced the fact that a fire in 1913 destroyed all of Coventry's Town Records. The records were stored at Thurber's General store in the village. An account in the Orleans County Monitor tells how they were kept in a safe at the store and the contents were badly burned. The Coventry Bicentennial Committee did their best in 1977 to fill in the pre-1913 historical gaps by interviewing the elder townspeople and documenting those memories with their oral histories

At least when Pliny wrote his history of Coventry he had access to all those town and land records that would perish 54 years later. He had access to the deeds and the maps showing the plot numbers for each settler family. In his history he mapped out who were the first families and the location of their settlements when they immigrated to Coventry around the year 1800.

The land records however couldn't tell him the exact dates when the families settled the land. Nor could they tell the stories of how the families got to Coventry or why they came. For this, Pliny relied on his interviews with some of the notable elders of the town and the families themselves. What they told Pliny was that Samuel Cobb and his son Tisdale were the first settlers in Coventry.

Samuel & Tisdale Cobb: "The pioneer settlers"

According to Vital Records, Samuel Cobb was born in 1753 in Taunton, Massachusetts. He married Silence Barney in Putney, Vermont in 1774 and moved to Westmoreland, New Hampshire, in 1776. He served in the Revolutionary War in both Massachusetts and New Hampshire regiments as a gunsmith. Tisdale was the Cobb's oldest son born in Westmoreland in 1777, the second of nine children.

Pliny White was not around to witness Coventry's origin story. He wrote it 59 years after the fact. In 1859 only two of the original Cobb settlers were still living in town for Pliny to interview. Lattice at 70 years old and Arabella at 64 were two of the four youngest Cobb children. Their memories of the family move to Coventry, while quite detailed were most likely incorrect as to when the move actually occurred. By their own account they remained in Westmoreland when their father and older siblings left for Coventry. They were each about 11 and 5 years old at the time. In 1859 their memories would have been of what their father and older siblings had told them about events in Coventry while they had remained in Westmoreland. Those memories were mixed with their own memories of making their own separate trip with their mother to complete the family move to Coventry. Lattice and Arabella were not at the beginning of the origin story and there are a few inconsistencies in their version of that story.

- Sally Pierce, Tisdale's wife, could not have accompanied her husband in the spring of 1800 as Pliny asserts because they would not be married until October of that year. Rather the couple likely traveled together as man and wife in the spring of 1801.
- When the Cobbs entered Brownington, Vermont, on horseback in March of 1800 they did not dismount because it was "the end of the road". The Hinman Settler road on which they were traveling had been completed north to the Canadian border at Derby Line five or six years earlier.
- Pliny's statement that a subgroup of "younger girls" were tending to the cows in the forest in 1800 rings false. Since Silence Cobb and Sally Pierce Cobb were actually the only two women who would have been in Coventry there is no subgroup of "younger girls" to be had. More likely Lattice and Arabella were rather referring to memories of themselves and their youngest sister Sabrina. At ages 12, 8 and 3, they would have been the "younger girls" to tend to the cows. But they would not arrive in Coventry until June of 1801 .
- The Cobb sisters must have remembered another version of the family settlement story which they told to Pliny White after he published his book, but before he died in 1869. Pliny wrote the Coventry history section of Abby Maria Hemenway's massive "Gazetteer of Vermont, Volume 3" published in 1877. Pliny amended the story of the Cobb settlement in Coventry to include an earlier initial visit made by Samuel and Tisdale in September 1799. They "visited the township with a view to settlement, decided to settle there, put up a log-house and returned for their families."
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*I was born in Saunter before written
~~where I lived~~ on the 3^d day of September in
the year 1753 where I lived until 1776 when
I removed to Westmoreland in the County
of Cheshire & State of New Hampshire
where I continued until the year 1801
when I removed to Coventry my present
place of residence*

• Samuel Cobb's Pension Deposition, Jan. 9, 1833

- In the only first hand account of the settlement of Coventry taken from pension application records, Samuel Cobb himself, the Revolutionary War veteran in 1833 traveled to Probate Court held in Barton, Vermont, in January of that year to apply for his military pension. In his deposition he states specifically that he lived in Westmoreland, New Hampshire, "until the year 1801 when I moved to Coventry my present state of residence".
- The 1800 Federal Census for Westmoreland, New Hampshire, provides further support for the later date that the Cobbs settled in Coventry. On April 29 1801 William Butterfield the census taker for Westmoreland signed off on his completed 1800 census form. On it is a single line entry for Samuel Cobb, resident in the town and head of a family of 11 people. Rather than having half of the Cobb family settled in their newly built Coventry cabins, William Butterfield had the opportunity to count the entire Cobb family at home in Westmoreland, New Hampshire.

Simon Cobb	-	-	1	-	1	-	-	2	-	1
Saml Cobb	1	1	2	-	2	2	1	1	1	-
Morgan Cobb	2	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	-
George Cobb	1	3	2	-	1	1	-	2	-	1
David Cobb	1	1	1	-	-	-	-	1	-	-

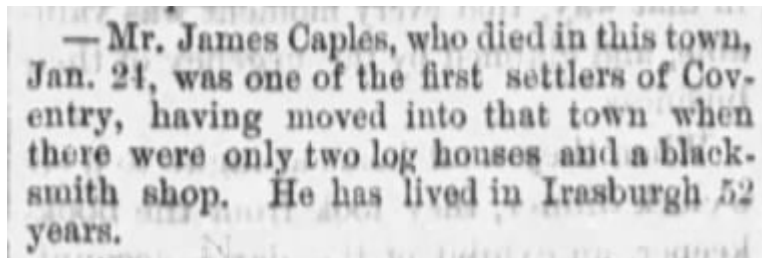
Westmoreland, New Hampshire Census - 1800

Samuel and Tisdale may have first come to Coventry in the fall of 1799. Whether or not they also built a cabin that year, they returned to Westmoreland that winter. The following spring of 1800 it is more likely that the two of them set out for Coventry by themselves rather than being accompanied by the older half of the family. They began building their settlement, raised two cabins and began clearings for the grains and potatoes that would come later.

With Tisdale's pending marriage to Sally in October back home in Westmoreland, it seems very unlikely that six members of the family would have left their work in Coventry to attend the wedding in Westmoreland, only to immediately return to Coventry to prepare to live their first winter there. More likely Samuel and Tisdale finished their preliminary Coventry settlement towards the end of summer 1800 by themselves. They returned to Westmoreland in the fall of 1800 to attend to Tisdale and Sally's marriage, and then spent the winter in Westmoreland preparing for the return to Coventry. It was in the spring of 1801 that Samuel returned, accompanied by his older children and Tisdale with his new wife Sally. Silence and the four younger children followed them a few months later and by the end of summer 1801 the Cobb settlement in Coventry was complete.

James & Lucena Caples: “One of the first settlers”

James Caples Jr. had been a successful farmer in Irasburg, Vermont for 52 years when he died in January of 1876. According to Federal Census records he was one of the the first black residents of Irasburg and the head of the first black family to farm the land in that town. He married Nancy Healy, a white woman from Lyndon, Vermont in 1825 and immediately began farming and raising a large family. He would become the patriarch of the family, and over the years the farmstead which was located off of today’s Back Coventry Road would house his own and the extended Caples family. He had his own page in the account book of Elijah Cleveland’s Coventry General Store where he purchased supplies for the farm. His obituary in the February 5 issue of the Vermont Journal contained a remarkable fact. He had been “one of the first settlers of Coventry”.



— Mr. James Caples, who died in this town, Jan. 24, was one of the first settlers of Coventry, having moved into that town when there were only two log houses and a blacksmith shop. He has lived in Irasburgh 52 years.

James Caples Jr. Obituary, Feb. 5, 1876

James Jr. was less than a year old when he arrived in Coventry. It would be more accurate to say that his parents James and Lucena Caples were one of the first Coventry settlers. James and Lucena Caples were born, most likely enslaved, in New London, Connecticut in the 1700’s, James in 1768 and Lucena in 1781. Whether they were manumitted, purchased or simply engineered their own freedom, by the summer of 1799 they had moved north to Williamsburg, Massachusetts, where James Jr. was born in June. James and Lucena would move on to Stanstead, Quebec, and eventually settle in Danville, Vermont, where they raised their nine children and both lived out the rest of their lives. But along the way they managed to spend at least a little time on the land in Coventry.

Just as Pliny White, the keeper of record for Coventry’s early history had to deal with detailed but perhaps fuzzy memories of people who had not actually been present at the events they were describing to him, the obituary writer for the Vermont Journal in 1876 was also dealing with the distant memories of the Caples family. The family was relating stories they had heard about the Caples settling on the land in Coventry. Nancy Caples was 75 when her husband James Jr. died. Whether it was she or one of her children who contacted the newspaper, they were relating third-hand stories heard from James Jr. who grew up hearing the stories from his parents James and Lucena.

The fact that James and Lucena Caples “moved into” Coventry and saw two log houses and a blacksmith shop is a pretty detailed piece of information, even if it was passed down through three generations of the family. They most likely saw the buildings in the summer of 1800 because James and Lucena did not linger long in Coventry. Their second child Hannah was born in Stanstead, Quebec in November of 1800. Between the births of their first two children the Caples settled in Coventry and saw the handiwork of the two blacksmiths Samuel and Tisdale Cobb.

Of course the Cobb family would eventually settle permanently in Coventry. Samuel and Tisdale would go on to organize and found the town in 1803, hold town offices, organize the first school, and petition the Vermont legislature to fix the confused state of land deeds in the town in 1806. Tisdale would become lieutenant of the militia unit stationed at Derby Line during the War of 1812. Their actions set the stage for Coventry’s

future development and helped to make the town what it is today. This is perhaps why the honor of first settler was bestowed on the Cobb family.

It is possible that the Caples family left Coventry before the Cobb's were finished improving their settlement. Perhaps they arrived in Coventry to see the Cobb's cabins, settled briefly there but then decided to continue on to Stanstead as the Cobb's continued to improve their settlement. But it is also possible that as Samuel and Tisdale Cobb returned home to Westmoreland to spend the rest of the winter in southern New Hampshire, two formerly enslaved black people, James Caples and his pregnant wife Lucena with a one year old son in tow were, however briefly, living 'settled' on the land in Coventry, Vermont.



James and Lucena Caples gravestone, Massey Cemetery, Danville, VT

The Mysterious John Morse

Beginning on August 4, 1800, Aaron Sheperd of Greensboro, Vermont began his job as census taker for the U.S. Federal Census for Orleans County and began counting its inhabitants. We don't know exactly when he arrived in Coventry to take his count. When he did he did not find either the Caples family nor the Cobb family settled there. Rather he found John Morse, head of a family of seven, three young boys, two young girls and his wife.

COVENTRY	John Morse	3.	1.	1.	1.	1.
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U.S. Federal Census for Coventry, Vermont - 1800

How is it that Pliny White never mentions John Morse in his history? Pliny obviously had access to the compiled census data numbers for 1800. Appendix H. of his book contains a chart of U.S. Census population figures for the town. For 1800 it shows that the population for Coventry was seven. What Pliny did not have access to in 1859 was the actual census page showing John Morse's name. He didn't notice that the population figure of seven did not correspond to the six Cobb's who supposedly were settled there. Nor did he notice the discrepancy that five young children were listed rather than the four older Cobb children.

How long had the Morse's been living in Coventry? If we take into account the one and half years of labor that it took for the Cobbs to clear land and build cabins for a large family we can assume the Morses also needed to spend the same amount of time preparing the land for their family. The Morse's must have been in Coventry at least since the spring of 1800 and probably since the autumn of 1799. We can be pretty sure that they were not in Coventry in the autumn of 1791 when the very first Federal census of Coventry was taken. That census returned a zero for the town population.

On January 3, 1794 Ira Allen who at that time was still the sole proprietor of Coventry advertised in the Vermont Gazette that he had lands in Coventry for sale and lease. He promised that a gristmill would be erected the next summer at the falls and that an agent would reside at the mill seat by May 5 of 1795 to assist settlers wishing to move there. There is no evidence that Allen ever had the gristmill built, but could it be that it was John Morse who was Allen's appointed agent?

		acres	value	average per acre	No. houses	value	No. houses
1	Greensboro	20,273	42,960	2 11	4	970	33
	Glover	20,300	18,320	-	88		4
	Barton	20,950	26,398	-	26		9
	Coventry	17,363	18,175	-	4		1
	Holland	19,200	14,520	-	70		
	Whitcomb's	1,500	1,000	-	67		
2	Brownington	13,366	18,637	-	39	1 155	3
	Derby	20,330	31,961	-	57	1 170	12
	Waits	21,312	13,096	-	61		
	Caldensburg	21,376	11,520	-	54		
	Salem	12,740	13,686	-	1	- 7	1
Brownington Gen	2,680	2,680	-	1			
		191,890	212,953	-	1 11	6 12,05	63

Thomas Tolman's return of taxable land in Coventry, December 1798

In July of 1798 the United States Congress enacted a Direct Tax to be levied on all land and houses in the sixteen United States. In Vermont, Thomas Tolman of Greensboro was appointed Principal Assessor for the Fifth Tax Division which included Coventry. Perhaps Assistant Assessor Amos Porter of Brownington, living the closest, did the counting. When he returned his report in December of 1798 Tolman found that one house valued at less than \$100 was standing in Coventry. Again, assuming that one and a half years was needed to construct a house for a large family would mean that house was started at least by the spring of 1798 and probably in the fall of 1797. There is no description of the size of the house in Coventry nor how many residents it contained. But by comparison, James Abbot's \$90 house listed in the tax report for Groton, Vermont was described as "one framed house twenty by twenty-six feet. Like John Morse, James Abbot had a large family of seven.

We don't know who this John Morse and family were. Following the migration patterns of most Vermont families in the late 1700's, they probably came from southern New England, settled in Coventry for awhile and then moved on to the west or north into Canada. The 1790 Census figures list a few dozen John Morse families living in New England. There is one Morse family in particular with a child count that could roughly have fit into the 1800 Coventry census count. The records are scarce but a John Morse and his wife Polly of Stoughton, Massachusetts, moved north from there in the early 1790's arriving on Grand Manan Island, New Brunswick, Canada early in the 1800's. There is some evidence that before they reached Canada, three or four of their children were born in Vermont between about 1794 and 1800. But the records are scanty and incomplete.

While it is interesting to speculate about which of the two families, Caples or Cobb settled first on the land in Coventry, that exercise does not clarify who the actual "First Settler" of Coventry was. We don't know exactly who they were, but we do know the family name. Toward the end of the year of 1798, nine months before Samuel and Tisdale Cobb first set eyes on the forests of the eastern part of Coventry, and six months before James Caples Jr. was born in Williamsburg, Massachusetts, there was a small house sitting somewhere on the land in Coventry. It was most likely John Morse along with his wife, three young sons and two daughters who were settled there. They were ready to take on a winter in Coventry as the town's first and only residents.

Pliny White should be the patron saint of all local history researchers. He was not a trained historian. He was a lawyer, newspaper editor, clerk and a preacher. He was passionate about the history of Vermont and especially the history of the towns we live in. Using the materials he had at hand in 1859 he wrote a detailed account of Coventry's history. Without his research the Town of Coventry today would literally have no knowledge of it's founding families.

Pliny also was humble about the possibility of making mistakes. On the last page of his history he thanks the residents of Coventry who assisted him in compiling the history. He then goes on to state that "No small pains have been taken to secure accuracy in the statement of facts and exactness as respects dates; but the author is not insensible of his liability to mistake, and will take it very kindly of any person who will detect an error and furnish the means of correcting it, or will communicate additional facts of importance or interest, to be put on record for the use of a future historian."

165 years later we have additional tools at hand to help clarify that history. In your honor Mr. Pliny White, we furnish these additional facts not available to you in 1859 and we put them on record for the use of future historians.