

Biographical Sketches

Thomas Alexander Fraser (1812–1882) and Anne Fraser (1817–1893)

Thomas Alexander Fraser was born on 12 August 1812 in Caledonia—an area that would later become part of the town of York—in Livingston County, New York. He was the youngest of eight children born to John Fraser, Sr. and Mary McDonald, Scottish immigrants who had arrived in the Genesee Country in 1804. By the time Thomas was born, his parents had already endured the uncertainties of migration and settlement and had established themselves as part of a growing Scottish Presbyterian community in upstate New York.

Childhood and Family Life

Thomas entered a household that had achieved a measure of stability after years of hardship. Unlike his older siblings, who remembered Scotland and the early struggles of frontier life, Thomas grew up knowing only the American landscape his parents had claimed through hard work. The family farm provided both livelihood and structure, and daily life revolved around seasonal agricultural work, church attendance, and family.

As the youngest son in a large family, Thomas benefited from the experience of parents who were no longer newcomers and from older siblings who shared in the work of the household. Responsibility came early, as it did for most rural children of the period, and farm labor shaped his upbringing. Education was limited but valued. Common schools operated intermittently, particularly during the winter months, and literacy was reinforced by the religious expectations of a Presbyterian household. Reading, writing, and arithmetic were practical skills, but they also reflected moral discipline and self-reliance.

Preparing for Independence

From an early age, Thomas would have understood that landownership lay at the heart of independence. And he also would have recognized that the family farm could not sustain all its sons. As the youngest, his future did not lie in inheriting land in Livingston County. Instead, his upbringing prepared him for moving west. His experiences instilled both the skills and the mindset required to establish himself elsewhere.

As Thomas approached adulthood, the world beyond York increasingly shaped his prospects. Siblings married or moved away, letters arrived from relatives in other regions, and the opening of the Erie Canal transformed distant places into attainable destinations. Westward movement was no longer exceptional; it was an expected path for young men seeking opportunity.

The Panic of 1837 and Westward Migration

By the late 1830s, the economic foundations of life in Livingston County had weakened. The Panic of 1837 brought bank failures, falling land values, and scarce credit. For young men without property, opportunities narrowed sharply. For Thomas, who had long known he would need to seek land elsewhere, the economic downturn removed any remaining incentive to stay.

Illinois offered a practical alternative. Even during the financial crisis, federal land there remained affordable, and letters from earlier migrants spoke of fertile soil and space to build a future. A well-established migration route to northern Illinois further reduced the risk. Thomas's decision to leave New York in 1839 was not impulsive but deliberate—the result of years spent observing his family's experience and learning that independence depended as much on the willingness to move as on the willingness to work.

Anne Fraser

Anne Fraser was born on 8 April 1817 in Knockbain, in the parish of Kirkhill, Invernessshire, Scotland. She was the sixth of eight children born to William Fraser and Isabelle MacLean. She immigrated to Livingston County, New York in 1835. [Anne's migration story is told in the next section: Migration from Scotland to Illinois.]

Marriage and Migration to Illinois

Thomas met Anne, a recent emigrant from Inverness, in Livingston County where Anne's brother, William, was living. Anne was from the Fraser Clan but from a different ancestral line from Thomas. The Scottish families in the area all knew each other, so it's not surprising that Anne met Thomas shortly after her arrival.

Thomas, Anne, and other family members must have discussed migrating to Illinois, where they could find inexpensive land. Shortly after Thomas and Anne married in 1839, they began their journey to Illinois, traveling with Anne's brother, William, and possibly other family members.

Their route likely followed established migration corridors: by wagon or stage to the Erie Canal, westward by canal boat to Buffalo, across the Great Lakes by steamboat to Chicago, and finally overland to Kane County. The urgency of their movement is underscored by the birth of their first child, Mary, on 21 November 1839, shortly after their arrival in Rutland Township.

Establishing a Farm and Family

When Thomas and Anne arrived in Rutland Township, they joined a small but growing Scottish settlement. By 1840, they were living independently, with Anne's brother, William, likely residing in the household. Thomas soon secured land through federal purchase, buying forty acres in 1844 for five dollars—a price that contrasted sharply with land values in New York.

Family life expanded alongside the farm. Children were born in steady succession: John H. in 1842, William in 1843, Isabelle in 1846—who died in infancy—Daniel in 1847, Anna Elizabeth (our ancestor) in 1850. The 1850 census reflects both family growth and economic stability, valuing Thomas's real estate at \$2,500, a substantial sum that points to successful farming and improvement of the land.

Throughout the 1850s, the family grew, and Thomas expanded his land holdings. Jeanette was born in 1852, followed by Ellen Isabel in 1854. That same year, Thomas purchased an additional ninety-five acres. In 1855, he acquired eighty more acres from Anne's brother, Donald, who had moved on

to California. These transactions kept land within the extended family while consolidating Thomas's position as a substantial farmer.

The decade was marked by sorrow as well as continuity. In 1860, the family lost their eldest daughter, Mary, a blow followed closely by the birth of their youngest child, Thomas Alexander Fraser, Jr., the following year. Grief returned in 1863 when their son William H. died after serving in the Civil War. These losses altered the household but did not undo the foundations Thomas and Anne had built. By 1870, Thomas's real estate was valued at \$10,610, with more than two hundred acres under cultivation—an enduring testament to a lifetime of labor and perseverance, even in the face of repeated loss.

Later Years and Death

By 1880, Thomas and Anne were surrounded by adult children. Two sons worked the farm, a daughter earned income as a dressmaker, and a hired laborer assisted with agricultural work. During this period, Thomas developed cancer and sought treatment in Rome, New York, where access to rail connections and physicians made care more feasible. While there, he contracted pneumonia and died on 20 November 1882.

The security Thomas had worked toward over a lifetime became fully evident at the end of his life. At his death, Thomas owned 275 acres valued at \$14,500. He had already arranged for the orderly transfer of land to his children, with provision for Anne's lifetime support. Anne remained closely connected to her children and extended family until her death on 21 December 1893.

Burial

Thomas and Anne were buried in Memorial Washington Reformed Presbyterian Cemetery, also known as the Washington–McQueen Cemetery, near Elgin, Illinois. The cemetery and nearby church reflect the continuity of Scottish Reformed Presbyterian tradition and the enduring role of faith and community in their lives.