

Biographical Sketch

John Thomas Mason (1816–1876) and Wealthy Diantha Kelsey (1826-1866)

John Thomas Mason was born on 13 February 1816 in Savoy, Berkshire County, Massachusetts, a small, rugged hill town settled only a generation earlier by families moving inland from older New England communities. He was raised in a household of six children and was the third of five sons. Life in Savoy demanded hard work. Farming the thin, rocky soil of the Berkshire uplands required constant labor, and long winters reinforced dependence on family cooperation and self-sufficiency.

By the time John Thomas reached adulthood, economic opportunity in western Massachusetts was increasingly limited, particularly for younger sons. Across New England, families faced exhausted farmland and shrinking prospects. As a result, many young men looked westward toward the expanding frontier of the Midwest, where land was plentiful and the promise of independence remained strong.

Westward Migration to Illinois

Around 1840, John Thomas Mason joined this movement west, leaving Massachusetts for northern Illinois. He traveled with his brother, David Mason, and joined several cousins—James, Oliver, John, and Daniel Mason—who also settled in the Fox River valley near what became West Dundee in Kane County. Their destination lay along a frontier corridor that was rapidly transforming from Indigenous land into organized American settlement following the Black Hawk War of 1832.

The journey from Savoy to Illinois was long and physically demanding. John Thomas likely traveled east to the Hudson River, then west along the Erie Canal to Buffalo. From there, steamboats carried migrants across the Great Lakes to Chicago, which in 1840 was still a muddy and undeveloped settlement. The final leg to the Fox River valley required overland travel on rough wagon roads or trails. The trip could take six to eight weeks and demanded endurance, careful planning, and faith in the opportunities that lay ahead.

Settlement on the Fox River

When John Thomas arrived in the Dundee area around 1841, the region was in its earliest phase of development. The first settlers had arrived only in 1835, opening a tavern and a store. The land had been surveyed around 1836, and the first federal land patents were issued in 1840. Roads were primitive, buildings were often log structures, and daily life centered on shared labor. The fertile prairie soil, unlike the rocky hills of Berkshire County, provided much greater agricultural potential than New England could offer.

In 1843, John Thomas secured a federal land patent for 140 acres at the standard price of \$1.25 per acre, marking his transition from migrant to landowner. This acquisition laid the foundation for long-term family stability and prosperity.

Marriage and Family Life

On 8 November 1845, John Thomas married Wealthy Diantha Kelsey in Cuba, Lake County, Illinois. Diantha had recently migrated from New York, bringing with her a family history shaped by

similar patterns of movement and settlement. By marrying, they brought together two families that were both experienced in adapting and moving westward. (Diantha's migration story is told in the Kelsey Biographical Sketch.)

Together, John and Diantha established a working farm and raised four children who were born between 1847 and 1851. Their household reflected the rhythms of mid-nineteenth-century rural life, defined by seasonal labor, cooperation, and gradual accumulation of resources. Tax records show that by 1848 John Thomas was paying \$233 in taxes, evidence that the farm was productive and expanding.

Agricultural Success and Economic Growth

By the 1860 census, John Thomas Mason's real estate was valued at \$6,000, with a personal estate of \$780—clear indicators of steady advancement. Like many farmers in the Fox River Valley, the Mason family adapted to changing markets as railroads connected rural Illinois to urban centers such as Chicago. During the mid-nineteenth century, the region began shifting from grain production toward dairying, a transition that would shape the family's economic future.

Loss, Remarriage, and Later Years

The years following the Civil War brought both prosperity and loss. Wealthy Diantha Mason died in 1866, ending more than twenty years of marriage. John Thomas remarried in 1867, and by the 1870 census, his holdings had grown substantially. His real estate was valued at \$10,000, with a personal estate of \$4,000—remarkable wealth for a man who had begun his adult life on the Massachusetts frontier.

As he aged, John Thomas transferred the farm to his only son, Judson Philetus Mason, and relocated to Elgin, Illinois, where he spent his final years. This move reflected a generational transition, with the next generation assuming responsibility for agricultural production while he stepped back from daily labor. John Thomas Mason died in Elgin in 1876, closing a life defined by migration, landownership, and generational progress.

Judson Philetus Mason, the Next Generation

John and Diantha's only son, Judson Philetus Mason, inherited the family farm following his father's retirement from active farming. By that time, the property comprised 160 acres and supported a herd of approximately thirty milk cows. The land was valued at about \$60 per acre—a dramatic increase from the \$1.25 per acre John Thomas Mason had paid when he first secured the land in 1843. This rise in value reflected not only decades of careful cultivation and improvement but also the growing importance of Kane County farmland as agriculture in the Fox River Valley shifted toward dairying.

Building on this foundation, Judson expanded the family's role in the regional dairy economy. In 1877, he established the Walnut Grove Creamery, one of many small but increasingly vital creameries opening throughout the Fox River Valley during this period. These creameries relied on milk supplied by local dairy farms and represented a transition from household-scale butter and cheese making to more centralized and commercial production. The Walnut Grove Creamery was a

productive enterprise, turning out approximately thirty cheeses and two hundred pounds of butter per day. Its success illustrates how the Mason family adapted to changing agricultural markets and participated directly in the development of Elgin and its surrounding townships as a major dairy-producing region.

A Generational Pattern of Westward Movement

John Thomas Mason's move to Illinois fits a clear generational pattern within the Mason family. Just as earlier ancestors moved from coastal Massachusetts to the Berkshire hills, and before that from England to New England, this migration represented another calculated step toward opportunity. Each move followed the edge of settlement westward, trading familiarity for possibility. In 1841, Illinois was the future—and for John Thomas Mason, West Dundee represented the next chapter in a long family tradition of adaptation and forward-looking decisions.