

Biographical Sketches

Sidney W. Hardy (1826–1885) and Lydia Helen Lott (1835–1889)

Sidney Hardy was born in 1826 in Orleans, Jefferson County, New York, the youngest of ten children born to Gideon Hardy and Abigail Burnham. When Sidney was still a toddler, the family moved to nearby Brownville, a young and growing community bordered by Lake Ontario to the west and the Black River to the south. Brownville had only recently been incorporated, and when the Hardys arrived it was still very much a place shaped by water—shipping, milling, fishing, and river traffic all defined daily life. It was here that Sidney spent his childhood and formative years.

Gideon Hardy was a carpenter by trade, and Sidney's older brothers largely turned to farming, following well-established rural paths. Sidney, however, showed little inclination to settle into the same pattern. From an early age he seemed drawn to adventure. At sixteen, he was apprenticed in Brownville to learn the iron trade at Skinner & Davis, where he remained for three years. During this period, he lived at home and developed a close friendship with his employer's son, William Skinner—a young man who shared Sidney's restless energy and appetite for risk.

Whaling Years

By 1844, having completed his apprenticeship, Sidney chose not to remain in Brownville or even in New York. Instead, he traveled to New Bedford, Massachusetts, then one of the world's great whaling ports, and signed on as a greenhand aboard the *Liverpool II*. As an inexperienced sailor, Sidney's duties were arduous and unglamorous: cleaning the ship, handling rigging, standing watch, and assisting in the brutal work of processing whales once they were captured. Over nearly three years at sea, the *Liverpool II* took approximately forty whales.

Whaling promised adventure and profit, but for Sidney the financial return was disappointing. After years of dangerous labor, he received only modest pay, a reality that echoed a recurring pattern in his life—effort and risk did not always yield the expected reward. Still, the experience changed him, broadened his view of the world, and strengthened his resolve to seek something better.

Foundry Work, Restlessness, and the Pull of the Frontier

When Sidney returned from whaling in 1847, he found work closer to home at the Clinton Foundry near Brownville, where he labored as a welder for about a year. By December 1848, he had returned to his parents' household, seemingly prepared to resume a quieter life among family. That intention, however, lasted only weeks. Early in 1849, William Skinner reentered Sidney's life with news that electrified the nation: gold had been discovered in California.

In a letter to his sisters, Sidney explained his decision to leave once more, writing that he was “choosing the pursuit of uncertain gain rather than the enjoyment of a social life at home with my friends.” It was a revealing statement—acknowledging the cost of departure while affirming his willingness to accept it.

The Gold Rush Journey

Sidney traveled to Albany in January 1849, intending to sail to San Francisco with Skinner. This decision placed him squarely within one of the largest internal migrations in American history, as thousands of young men left farms, shops, and trades behind, convinced that mobility itself was a form of opportunity. Illness intervened; Sidney was hospitalized and missed their ship, while Skinner continued on alone. After recovering, Sidney applied for a passport and secured passage aboard the barque *Clyde*.

The *Clyde* finally sailed on 24 April 1849, and for more than six months Sidney kept a meticulous journal, recording weather, longitude and latitude, whale sightings, quarrels among passengers, and the monotony and strain of life at sea. The ship rounded Cape Horn, stopped in Valparaíso, Chile, and reached San Francisco on 6 November 1849.

Mining, Merchants, and Return East

Upon arrival in California, Sidney joined with three partners—Christian Benson and Anthony and Philip Arnet—to pursue mining in the Sierra foothills near Woods Creek and Jamestown. The reality of mining quickly fell short of expectations. After weeks of labor, Sidney's share amounted to only eight dollars in gold. By April 1850, the partners abandoned mining altogether and opened a supply store, the Rock River Tent, near Green Springs.

The store proved profitable but unstable. Theft, legal disputes, and violence plagued the operation, and after nine months the partners sold the business for \$1,800. In January 1851, Sidney began the long journey home, traveling by steamer through the Isthmus of Panama before returning to New York in the spring.

Land, Stability, and the Search for a Permanent Home

Back in New York, Sidney made a decisive change. Seeking stability and influenced by the success of his brother, John, he resolved to become a farmer. In 1851, at twenty-five years old, he purchased 123 acres in Carlton, Orleans County, on the shores of Lake Ontario. The land cost \$4,000, most of it financed through a substantial mortgage that required consistent annual payments.

In Carlton, Sidney met Lydia Helen Lott, whom he married on 11 June 1854. Lydia had been born in Plymouth, Wayne County, Michigan, and her own life had already been shaped by migration and loss. After her father died in 1840, she moved with her mother to Carlton, Orleans County, New York—a relocation that brought her, eventually, into Sidney's path.

Farming, however, proved no easier than Sidney's earlier ventures. During these years, Lydia emerged as a stabilizing force—rooted, practical, and centered on family life. While Sidney continued to pursue new possibilities through change and reinvention, Lydia provided continuity through her steady labor, resilience, and commitment to home. She kept the household steady as land was sold and finances shifted, even as weather, pests, and volatile markets undercut profits despite respectable harvests. Within a few years, mounting mortgage obligations forced Sidney and Lydia to sell portions of their land, and eventually the entire farm, without realizing a profit.

Westward Again: Joining the Stream to Illinois

In 1857, with farming in New York exhausted as an option, Sidney and Lydia moved west. This relocation fits squarely within the broader nineteenth-century pattern of east-to-west migration, particularly among families from upstate New York who followed canals, lakes, and railroads toward the agricultural promise of the Midwest. They spent time in Michigan—where Lydia’s mother and sister lived—and then settled in northern Illinois. By 1858, the family was established in Shabbona, DeKalb County, where Sidney once again took up farming, this time with better results.

Their family grew alongside their fields. Children were born in New York, Michigan, and Illinois, marking each stage of their movement. While Sidney experienced moments of agricultural success, the loss of young children to illness cast long shadows over these years. Sidney and Lydia had nine children together, six of whom lived to adulthood.

War and Its Consequences

The Civil War altered Sidney’s course yet again. In 1865, changes to enlistment laws required men up to age forty-five to serve, and Sidney, then thirty-eight, enlisted in the Union Navy. He served in the Mississippi Squadron aboard several vessels and endured a serious bout of dysentery that required hospitalization in Memphis. Though he was discharged later that year, his health never fully recovered.

Returning home weakened and burdened by lingering illness, Sidney sold his Illinois land and relocated with his family to Burlington, Kane County, near Lydia’s sister. Farming continued, but increasingly the physical labor fell to Lydia and other family members as Sidney’s heart condition worsened. It was during this difficult time that Sidney and Lydia’s ninth child was born-- our ancestor, Clarissa Helen “Nellie” Hardy, born in 1874.

Final Years and Legacy

The final decades of Sidney’s life were quieter—defined less by ambition than by endurance. Though his health declined steadily, he remained at home, surrounded by children, grandchildren, and extended family.

When Sidney died in 1885, he left little property and many unresolved debts, but he also left what earlier generations of Hardys had sought when they first set foot in New England—continuity. He left a wife of nearly thirty years, six living children, and twelve grandchildren, bound not by fortune, but by shared place, memory, and labor. That legacy, measured in people rather than possessions, stands firmly within the long Hardy tradition of purposeful migration followed, at last, by home.

Measured strictly in wealth, Sidney Hardy’s life might seem a series of unfinished ventures. Viewed through the lens of migration, however, it reads differently: as a sustained effort to locate the right place—geographically, economically, and socially—where effort could translate into security for his family. In this respect, Sidney’s life mirrors that of his Puritan forebears, who crossed oceans and borders not in search of ease, but of alignment between belief, labor, and land.

Lydia's Later Years

After Sidney's death, Lydia applied for a widow's pension, which was denied because she didn't have documentation of her marriage. In 1888, she remarried a much younger man, Joseph Sheldon. Few documents have been found about Joseph Sheldon, so it's not clear if he worked on the farm, was a neighbor in Burlington, or met Lydia at a local event. Their marriage didn't last long. About a year after their marriage, Lydia was thrown from a wagon and died, the final chapter closing on a life shaped, like Sidney's, by movement, resilience, and resolve.

Sydney and Lydia Helen Hardy were buried together at North Clinton Cemetery in Waterman, Kane County, Illinois.