

Biographical Sketches

Elijah Selby Calkins (1793–1883) and Elizabeth Jane “Betsy” Allen (1799–1885)

Elijah Selby Calkins was born on 5 August 1793 in Saratoga, New York, into a family already shaped by generations of frontier movement. He grew up during a period of rapid expansion in upstate New York, when fertile land was still available but increasingly contested as population grew. Farming life was labor-intensive and family-centered, and young men faced mounting pressure to seek land beyond settled districts if they hoped to establish independent households.

Early Life in Saratoga County, New York

Saratoga County in the early nineteenth century was still feeling the aftereffects of the American Revolution. Life there was demanding but familiar: land was cleared, crops raised, and households depended heavily on family labor. Large families were the norm, and Elijah’s family was no exception. He was the oldest of nine children, and, like most children in New York farming families, he contributed to the work of the household from an early age.

By the time Elijah reached adulthood, Saratoga County was becoming increasingly settled. Land prices were rising, farms were subdividing, and opportunities for young men to establish independent households were tightening—conditions that had already driven earlier generations of the Calkins family to seek new opportunities elsewhere.

Elizabeth Jane Allen’s Background

Elizabeth Jane Allen, known throughout her life as Betsy, was born on 4 February 1799 in Ontario, Canada. Nothing is known of her immediate family, but later census records indicate that she was Canadian-born and that she identified her ancestry as German.

Betsy spent her childhood in a region still in the early stages of settlement. Ontario, then known as Upper Canada, was a young colony shaped by forest clearing and the uncertainties of frontier life. Her earliest years were spent in a landscape of dense woods, newly cleared fields, rough log houses, and farms established through constant labor.

Daily life was practical and demanding. Families relied largely on their own efforts for planting, harvesting, food preservation, clothing production, and shelter. Children were expected to assume responsibility at an early age and were essential contributors to household survival. Betsy would have assisted with domestic work, childcare, and food preparation from a young age.

Community life existed but was limited. Neighbors relied upon one another during harvests, illness, and emergencies, while church gatherings—when available—offered rare opportunities for shared order and social stability. Education was informal and irregular, often conducted at home or in temporary local schools. Life followed the seasons, with winter bringing difficult conditions.

A defining experience of Betsy’s childhood was the War of 1812. Upper Canada lay along the front lines of the conflict. Even families far removed from major engagements lived with uncertainty as troops moved through the region, supplies were requisitioned, and rumors of invasion spread. Food

shortages and anxiety were common. In this context, loyalty to Britain was less ideological than practical, as British authority represented land security, legal continuity, and protection in a vulnerable colony.

Culturally, Upper Canada was diverse. Although governed under British law, many settlers were American-born, and farming methods, household customs, and religious practices closely resembled those of New England and upstate New York. As a result, the society was politically British but culturally familiar to families who would later migrate back into the United States.

Marriage and Early Family Life

In 1814, Elijah Selby Calkins married Elizabeth Jane “Betsy” Allen in Mexico, Oswego County, New York, where Elijah was then residing on the United States side of Lake Ontario. Because little is known of Betsy’s family, it is unclear whether her family had also relocated to New York or where the couple first met. Their marriage, nevertheless, marked the beginning of a family life closely associated with migration.

Before 1816, Elijah and Betsy relocated from Saratoga County to Oswego County, then part of New York’s developing interior frontier. This move of approximately 120–140 miles represented a significant undertaking, typically requiring weeks of wagon travel over rough roads and river corridors. Several of their early children were born in this region, including Luther (our ancestor), Almira, Lovisa Ann, and Warren Sidney.

Migration to Upper Canada

Around 1825, Elijah moved his young family to Upper Canada.¹ This migration was not political in nature but was motivated by economic considerations and family connections. Betsy herself had been born in Ontario, suggesting the presence of family and practical support upon arrival. Upper Canada offered more affordable land, familiar British legal and religious institutions, and fewer pressures from land subdivision than were then present in New York. The journey north, often combining wagon travel with lake or river transportation, was slow and physically demanding, particularly with children and livestock. Nevertheless, it followed a pattern long established within the family.

In Ontario, the family expanded substantially. Over time, fourteen children were born—seven sons and seven daughters—in various locations including Haldimand, Wellington (Maryborough), Simcoe, and surrounding districts. Census records from 1861 and 1871 place Elijah and Betsy in Maryborough Township, Wellington County, indicating a period of relative stability following years of movement. The distribution of their children’s birthplaces, however, reflects continued mobility within the province as Elijah sought suitable land and opportunity.

¹ Now Southern Ontario, Canada.

Elijah and Betsy spent much of their adult lives in Ontario, raising children who later married into families such as the Samis and McCabe lines, some of whom returned to the United States during the mid-to-late nineteenth century.

Different Perspectives of Life on the Move

Although Elijah and Betsy shared the same migrations, land, and hardships, they did not experience frontier life in the same way. Elijah's labor was outward and finite: clearing land, building structures, tending livestock, and making the decisions that carried the family westward. His work was physically demanding and often dangerous, but it produced visible results—fields cleared, cabins raised, moves completed—that were recognized by neighbors and marked as progress.

Betsy's labor, by contrast, was inward, constant, and without clear completion. Over more than thirty years she bore and raised children, managed illness and loss, maintained the household, and restored domestic order after every move. Her work produced no milestones, only continuity. Yet that continuity was essential. Elijah's labor created opportunity, but Betsy's sustained life itself. Every mile west depended on her unending work, and the survival and success of their children stood as the enduring proof of her achievement.

As Elijah and Betsy grew older, the balance of strength that had once carried them across forests and provincial boundaries inevitably shifted. The couple who had spent decades building outward now turned inward once more, this time relying on the very continuity Betsy had preserved. The children she had borne, raised, and steadied through countless moves had grown into adults capable of offering return support. In this reversal lay a quiet symmetry: the generation sustained by her constancy would now sustain her.

Later Years and Final Migration

When Elijah and Betsy were in their 80's, they undertook one final relocation. About 1880, their eldest son Luther brought them to Hampshire, Kane County, Illinois, where several members of the extended Calkins family had already settled. This move differed from earlier migrations in that Elijah was no longer seeking land or opportunity for expansion, but rather family support and continuity in his advanced years. Unlike the earlier wagon journeys of his life, much of this final migration was likely accomplished by rail, reflecting the profound changes in transportation during Elijah's lifetime.

Death and Legacy

Elijah Selby Calkins died on 23 September 1883 in Hampshire, Kane County, Illinois, having reached the age of ninety. His death marked the end of a life that spanned nearly a century of profound transformation in North America—from the agrarian world of the early republic, through the settlement of Upper Canada, to the rail-linked communities of the American Midwest. He was buried in North Plato Cemetery (Campton Township Cemetery), the final resting place for several members of the extended Calkins family and a tangible marker of the family's last westward step.

Elizabeth Jane “Betsy” Allen Calkins survived her husband by less than two years, dying on 12 June 1885. She was buried beside Elijah, closing a partnership that had endured more than six decades of marriage, migration, childbirth, labor, and loss.