

Biographical Sketches

Francis Hollister Kelsey (1797-1865) and Wealthy Susanna Ackley (1805-1884)

Francis Hollister Kelsey, born in 1797, was the youngest of three children raised in Sheldon, Genesee County, during the earliest years of Euro-American settlement in western New York. His childhood unfolded in a frontier community still in the process of being carved from forest into farmland. Daily life required hard physical labor, cooperation among neighboring families, and early responsibility for children, who contributed to household and agricultural work from a young age. Roads were few, winters were long, and material comforts were limited.

Despite these conditions, Sheldon was not culturally isolated. Many of its settlers, including the Kelsey family, came from long-established Connecticut communities and carried with them New England traditions of literacy, religious observance, and social order. Francis grew up in a household that valued education, discipline, and proper conduct. These influences help explain later descriptions of him as a “polished gentleman,” a phrase that in the early nineteenth century signified refinement of manners and social confidence. In such an environment, civic duty and readiness to defend one’s community were understood not as abstractions, but as practical responsibilities.

As Francis entered young manhood, the values instilled during his upbringing were reinforced by the broader civic culture of the period. On 15 March 1812, at about fifteen years of age, he enlisted as a volunteer in the War of 1812, a decision consistent with the experiences of many young men raised in post-Revolutionary families near the Canadian border. In western New York, the War of 1812 was not a distant national event but an immediate local concern. British forces, frontier skirmishes, and militia activity along the Niagara frontier directly affected daily life, and the possibility of invasion or disruption was real. Military preparedness was therefore a visible and routine part of community life.

Susanna’s Early Life

If Francis’s early life reflects the demands of frontier boyhood, Wealthy Susanna Ackley’s childhood reveals the contrasting stability—and discipline—of an established New England town. Wealthy Susanna Ackley was born 4 December 1805 in East Haddam, Connecticut, the youngest of four children. Her family descended from Nicolas Ackley, who emigrated from Essex, England, and settled in Haddam in 1655 as one of the town’s founders. For more than three generations, the Ackleys lived continuously in East Haddam.

Susanna grew up in a world of stability and routine. East Haddam was a long-established New England town where farms and churches anchored daily life. Life followed predictable patterns rooted in agricultural and religious observance. Raised in a multigenerational household, Susanna learned habits of discipline, hard work, and proper conduct—values that would steady her through a lifetime of repeated migration.

Adolescence and Migration to New York

That sense of continuity, however, would change. By the early nineteenth century, land scarcity increasingly limited opportunity in East Haddam. In 1817, Susanna's father, Ithamar Ackley, purchased land in Wales, Erie County, which was near Buffalo, New York. This move reflected a broader post-Revolutionary migration pattern, as established New England families sought land and opportunity farther west.

During her adolescence in Wales, Susanna transitioned from a background of established stability to a phase characterized by transformation. She no longer lived in town with her friends and relatives, and she needed to learn new skills living on the frontier. The community was developing, social networks were emerging, and household chores were more demanding. This period fostered adaptability and resilience, blending the discipline of her Connecticut upbringing with the self-reliance required in a newer settlement, traits she would need for her later life.

Marriage and Family Life

On 19 March 1823, Francis Hollister Kelsey married Wealthy Susanna Ackley in Wales Center, Erie County, New York. Marriage marked not only the beginning of a household, but the start of a pattern of movement and adjustment that would define their family life. Following their marriage, they established their household in western New York, settling primarily in Sheldon.

Their early married life combined stability with movement typical of the era. Their first child, Wealthy Diantha Kelsey (our ancestor), was born in 1826 in Buffalo, suggesting a temporary residence or employment connection in Erie County. By 1828, the family had returned to Genesee County, where Elvira Kelsey was born. Angeline Kelsey followed in 1830, firmly placing the family in Sheldon.

The household continued to grow with the births of Philetus Kelsey (1833) and Mary Melvina Josephine Kelsey (1836). During these years, Francis and Wealthy raised young children within a settled agricultural community.

The late 1830s brought personal loss. Francis's mother, Betsey Hollister Kelsey, died in 1831, followed by his father, Samuel Joseph Kelsey, in 1838, both in Sheldon. That same year, the couple welcomed their youngest New York-born son, DeFores Kelsey. These losses, combined with the practical realities of supporting a growing family, sharpened the question that many in Francis's generation eventually faced: whether to remain rooted, or to move once more.

Decision to Move West

By the early 1840s, Francis and Susanna faced the same pressures that had shaped earlier generations: maturing communities, subdivided land, and limited prospects for growing families. With six children, the need for expansion was pressing.

Francis belonged to a generation raised to view westward movement as both prudent and virtuous. As a War of 1812 veteran and a descendant of earlier Connecticut migrants, relocation in search of opportunity was familiar. Moving west allowed Francis to reaffirm his role as an independent

household head and provider, while carrying New England values of order, education, and civic responsibility into a new community.

The 1842 Journey to Illinois¹

After nearly two decades in western New York, Francis Hollister Kelsey undertook the final major migration of his life, moving his family from Sheldon to Illinois. Land in Genesee County had become increasingly expensive, while opportunities for expansion and advancement lay to the west. Encouraged by reports of fertile soil and inexpensive land, Francis set out with his wife, Wealthy Susanna, and their six children. They were accompanied by extended family members, including Susanna's mother, Mary Holmes Ackley.

For Wealthy Susanna, the decision meant leaving behind familiar communities and assuming the heavy physical and emotional labor that westward travel demanded of women. Throughout the journey, she bore responsibility not only for her own endurance, but for the daily care of her children, the management of food and clothing, and the steady maintenance of family routines under uncertain conditions.

The Kelsey party departed by wagon train on Saturday, 20 July 1842, and initially made steady progress. On the third day, while traveling near Lake Erie in Ohio, the journey was interrupted by a serious accident when the youngest child, DeFores, fell from the wagon and was run over by the rear wheel. He was carried to a physician in the next village and treated, after which the family remained before continuing on their journey. For Susanna, this episode would have brought acute fear and anxiety, underscoring how quickly the risks of travel could threaten the lives of her children.

On 9 August 1842, the twentieth day of travel, they arrived in Chicago. There, Francis found their household goods safely in place, having been shipped separately by water. From Chicago the family proceeded to Gainesville on the Des Plaines River, where they were initially reported to be in good health.

Illness soon followed, however, with ague and fever affecting members of the household. Although Mary Holmes Ackley, Susanna's mother, had endured the journey well, she became ill in September, a condition attributed by a physician to exposure during travel through Michigan. During this period, Susanna assumed the demanding role of caregiver while still managing the daily needs of a large household, balancing worry for her mother with the continued care of her children.

After spending time near Elgin, the family was advised that healthier conditions could be found farther north. Acting on this advice, Francis removed his family up the Fox River into Lake County. There were a few houses in the area, and land was available for settlement. The Kelsey group split up at this point, with Francis and his family staying in what is now Cuba Township, Illinois, and his

¹ The details of the journey come from the papers of Francis's sister and his own journal.

sister's family continuing to Wisconsin. For Susanna, this final separation marked another emotional turning point, as kin networks shifted and familiar supports grew more distant.

The journey from New York to Illinois was long and dangerous. Though marked by accident and illness, it successfully carried the Kelsey family into the next stage of their westward movement, completing a migration that had begun generations earlier in Connecticut and continued through New York into the upper Midwest. With their arrival in Lake County, the long journey gave way to the more enduring work of settlement.

Settlement and Landownership

After the Kelsey family settled in Illinois, they quickly began to establish permanence and community ties. In 1844, Francis and Susanna welcomed their youngest son, Orville, marking the first child born after their move west. That same year, Francis purchased 160 acres of land, a decisive step that transformed the family from recent migrants into landed settlers and secured their economic footing in their new home near Cuba.

While Francis focused on clearing land and expanding acreage, Susanna transformed the raw frontier environment into a functioning household. She preserved food, made and repaired clothing, cared for children and the sick, and imposed order and routine on a landscape still lacking established infrastructure. Her work provided stability during the family's most vulnerable years in Illinois.

Not all developments were marked by progress and celebration. Even as the family laid down roots, the hazards of frontier life remained ever-present. In 1849, the family suffered a profound loss when Philetus died as the result of a fall from a hay barn, a reminder of the everyday dangers of agricultural life on the midwestern frontier. For Susanna, this loss represented both personal grief and the emotional burden of continuing daily labor amid mourning. His death came during the family's early years in Illinois, underscoring both the risks inherent in frontier farming and the resilience required to build a new life.

By the time of the 1850 census, Francis Hollister Kelsey, then aged 53, was firmly established as a landholding farmer in Cuba. His real estate was valued at \$1,200, reflecting both the acreage he had acquired and the improvements made since the family's arrival in Illinois. Francis and his wife, Wealthy Susanna, were living with four of their children—Angeline, Mary, DeFores, and Orville—indicating a household still centered on family labor and shared agricultural work, much of it organized and sustained by Susanna's daily efforts.

Over the following decade, Francis continued to expand and adjust his landholdings, demonstrating both ambition and financial engagement with the developing local land market. In 1854, he made a substantial acquisition of 350 acres, significantly increasing the scale of his farming operations. Additional purchases followed: in 1856, he acquired 40 acres for \$280, and in 1858, he invested \$1,000 on an additional 44 acres. These transactions reflect an ongoing process of consolidation,

improvement, and strategic expansion, suggesting that Francis was not merely sustaining his farm but actively building a substantial agricultural estate.

By the time of the 1860 census, Francis Hollister Kelsey and his wife Wealthy Susanna were still residing together on their farm in Cuba, with their sons DeFores and Orville working the farm. The census and agricultural schedules show the growth of Francis's farm over the past decade. By this point, 200 acres were improved, a substantial increase from 1850, indicating sustained investment in clearing, cultivation, and infrastructure. The farm's cash value had risen to \$2,400, with an additional \$100 in farming implements and \$280 in livestock, underscoring both growth and diversification.

Final Years

By the mid-1860s, the outlines of Francis Kelsey's life work were clearly visible. Francis Hollister Kelsey died on 3 October 1865, bringing to a close a life marked by service, migration, and steady achievement. Having survived frontier hardship, war, and repeated westward moves, he left behind a well-established family and a prosperous farm in Cuba. He was laid to rest in White Memorial Cemetery, where his burial marks the final chapter of a man who successfully carried New England values of industry, responsibility, and community into the Illinois frontier.

Francis's will left his real and personal estate to Wealthy Susanna for her lifetime, with the land later divided between DeFores and Orville. In the years following his death, Susanna continued to manage her affairs with care and independence. In 1870, she remained on the farm, living next to DeFores and his family. Between 1868 and 1875, she sold her land to DeFores, ensuring continuity of ownership and the preservation of the family homestead.

Though not located in the 1880 census, she likely resided with relatives in her later years. Wealthy Susanna Kelsey died on 24 September 1884 and was buried beside her husband at White Memorial Cemetery, closing a life marked by endurance, adaptability, and quiet strength.