

Migration from England to Illinois

Name	Migration Date	From	To
William James Kelsey (1600-1680)	1633	Chelmsford, Essex, England	Cambridge, MA, Hartford, CT, Killingworth, CT
Stephen Kelsey (1677-1745)	1717	Hartford, CT	Weathersfield, CT New Hartford, CT
Samuel Joseph Kelsey (1756-1838) ¹	1789 Abt. 1796	New Hartford, CT Cambridge, Washington, NY	Cambridge, Washington, NY Sheldon, Genesee, NY
Francis Hollister Kelsey (1797-1866)	1842	Sheldon, Genesee, NY	Cuba, Lake, Illinois

William James Kelsey (1600-1680)

The Kelsey family story in America begins in Essex, where the family can be traced to at least the sixteenth century. This region was economically active yet marked by profound religious tension. William James Kelsey was born on 30 December 1600 in Chelmsford, Essex. Like many men of the “middling sort,” William’s stability depended on land, labor, reputation, and conformity to strict social and religious expectations.

Religion permeated daily life in Essex. Church attendance was compulsory, moral conduct was closely scrutinized, and sermons were long and exacting. It was in this setting that William encountered the preaching of Thomas Hooker, whose message emphasized personal spiritual conversion, moral discipline, and congregational authority. As ecclesiastical pressure increased and ministers like Hooker were silenced or threatened, families who shared these convictions faced mounting difficulty raising children according to their beliefs. For William Kelsey and others, emigration became an act of conscience.

¹ Note on Conflicting Genealogies

Some published and online genealogies state that Betty Hollister married *two* different men named Samuel Kelsey—one identified as the son of Samuel Kelsey and Mary Ann Stanclift, and another as the son of Jonathan Kelsey and Ruth Scott. Careful review of available evidence does not support this claim.

There is no primary documentation—such as marriage records, probate files, church entries, or town records—indicating that Betty Hollister remarried or was widowed prior to the birth of her known children. All records consistently associate her with Samuel Kelsey (1756–1838), who died in Sheldon, Genesee County, New York. The children attributed to this couple form a single, continuous family group with no indication of a second marriage.

The confusion appears to arise from the existence of two contemporaneous men named Samuel Kelsey in New England, whose identities were later conflated in compiled genealogies. The Samuel who was the son of Jonathan Kelsey and Ruth Scott followed a different geographic and familial path and is not supported by evidence as the husband of Betty Hollister.

Accordingly, the interpretation that Betty Hollister married two different Samuel Kelseys is considered incorrect, and the evidence supports a single marriage to Samuel Kelsey, son of Samuel Kelsey and Mary Ann Stanclift.

The Great Migration and the Founding of New England Communities

By the early 1630s, William joined the Puritan exodus from England to New England. He first settled in New Towne—later Cambridge—where Hooker gathered many former English parishioners. This small settlement emphasized shared labor, strict discipline, and religious conformity, reinforcing the values that had prompted migration in the first place.

In 1636, William participated in one of the defining movements of early New England: Hooker's overland migration from Cambridge to the Connecticut River Valley. Traveling with families, livestock, and household goods, the group established Hartford, a town governed by principles later reflected in the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut. William's participation placed him among the founders of Connecticut's civic and religious life.

Later, as riverfront land became scarce, William moved again—this time to Killingsworth (now Clinton), part of Connecticut's second wave of settlement. His life thus traced a clear arc: from religious pressure in England, to experimental communities in Massachusetts, and finally to stable colonial society in Connecticut. This pattern of purposeful relocation would become a defining family strategy.

Stephen Kelsey (1677-1745)

By the early eighteenth century, that strategy was renewed by William's descendants. Stephen Kelsey, born in Hartford in 1677, faced the same pressures his grandfather had known—land scarcity and subdivision among heirs. Around 1717, Stephen moved his growing family first to Wethersfield and then westward to New Hartford in Litchfield County. There, newly opened lands along the Farmington River offered opportunities unavailable in older river towns.

Stephen's move established a durable pattern: when land became limited, the family relocated—deliberately, collectively, and with an eye toward long-term stability. Some of Stephen's children remained in New Hartford and nearby towns, anchoring the family locally, while others prepared the way for continued westward movement.

Samuel Joseph Kelsey (1756-1838)

The next step was taken by Stephen's grandson, Samuel Joseph Kelsey, born in New Hartford in 1756. Following the Revolutionary War, inland Connecticut towns faced population growth, rising land prices, and increasingly fragmented farms. For veterans and newly married men, independence often required moving.

Samuel's marriage to Betty (Betsey) Hollister further shaped his migration. Through Hollister, Warner, and Case family connections, Samuel became part of a broader kin-based migration network. In the late 1780s, he and his family moved first to Cambridge, New York, a recognized staging area for Connecticut families entering New York. Births of children there in 1790 and 1794 confirm several years' residence.

From Cambridge, Samuel and related families continued west to Sheldon, where inexpensive land and family made permanent settlement feasible. This migration was neither abrupt nor isolated; it unfolded in stages, guided by family networks. Importantly, although allied families had Killingworth roots, Samuel's Kelsey line derived from inland Connecticut, not the coastal Killingworth Kelseys.

Francis Hollister Kelsey (1797-1866)

The final major extension of this multigenerational movement was carried out by Samuel's son, Francis Hollister Kelsey. Born in Sheldon in 1797, Francis inherited both the experience of frontier life and a family tradition that viewed migration as prudent. By the early 1840s, land in Genesee County had become increasingly subdivided, while opportunities for large-scale farming lay farther west: Illinois.

[Francis and Susanna's lives are told in the Biographical Sketches.]