

CASS COUNTY, MICHIGAN PROFILES  
PRESERVING LOCAL HISTORY  
WITH PEOPLE, EVENTS & PLACES  
By Jeannie Watson

# GEORGE BEDFORD

George Bedford and his family migrated to Cass County, Michigan, making a significant impact on its pioneering community, politics, property development, and population. He founded a large family that, with its affiliate families, has survived for ten generations in Southwestern Michigan.

George William Bedford was born at his parent's farm estate in Shobdon, Hereford, Lincolnshire, England, on September 9, 1813. His father, John Bedford (1761-1831) was a retired British Army soldier, who had survived the Siege of Gibraltar, and the death of his first wife Elizabeth Bates. John retired to the family farm, married George's mother, begot a family, and then died leaving his young wife and children to fend for themselves. George's mother, Sarah Anne Sward was the daughter of a local property owner and book printer. She was, also, 29 years younger than her husband. The family was of the gentry class (upper middle class), educated and lived a pleasant existence, until John died.

When his father was alive, young George was taught to be a "steward of the soil," coaxing fertile fields to yield abundant crops. He learned to view the earth, and its potential to produce sustenance, as a cherished and valued commodity. Farming was a family tradition, gentleman's pursuit and a time honored career. As a result, George grew to young adulthood having both a respect for the land, and the desire to own plenty of it. Deciding to remain on the English land of his ancestors, like his brothers, he joined his family's efforts, and expanded the business to include cattle and become a leather supplier.

When George's father passed away. Sarah, his mother was courted by a local farm overseer, whom she married. As grandchildren were born, the extended family grew, and it became apparent to all involved that the family farm was not large enough to support everyone. When Sarah's second husband died, and neighbors were unwilling to sell them adjoining land for expansion, the family decided to split up. George, wife Ann, brother William and mother Sarah decided to migrate to North America in 1837.

George and his family first made their way to Onondaga County, after arriving in New York. Being a new immigrant, and "stranger in a unfamiliar land," he found work as a farm worker and gardener. Unsatisfied with such a meager existence, he quickly decided to change his location, and moved to Syracuse, New York. Finding the same disadvantages there, George and his family decided that they would follow William Smith, Ann's brother, to Michigan. George was age 24 years, wife Ann was 23, mother Sarah was 47, and brother William Bedford was 27.

George's heavily laden covered wagons arrived in the fall of 1841 to Silver Creek Township, Cass County, Michigan. Cold was setting in and the leaves had fallen from the trees. Being a stranger to the area, he went directly to his brother-in-law's homestead on Section 29. With winter fast approaching, William Smith insisted that his relatives spend the winter with his family in their cabin.

On November 2, 1841, George Bedford bought 80 acres of land next to his brother-in-law's homestead in Section 28. His mother, Sarah, purchased 40 acres on George's eastern land border in the same section. That winter, George, William Bedford, William Smith, and the sons of the family, cleared land, stock-piled logs, hunted, ice fished, and prepared for the spring. George and William Bedford (who came to help his mother homestead) learned how to survive in the rough and unforgiving wilderness.

When spring came in 1842, George and the other men of the family built two log cabins. The larger cabin was for himself and his young family. The other cabin was for his mother and brother on her forty acres. These pioneers demonstrated the essentials needed to succeed in an untamed land; "ambition, intelligence, mental and physical strength, stamina and persistence."

The Cass County, Michigan tax collector "revenue agent" stopped by George's and Ann's new cabin one day in early summer. George's crops were only half planted, his wife was just sowing the seeds in the vegetable garden, and there was much work to be done. George was told that his Michigan land taxes were due at the end of the summer. If they were not paid on time, his land would be taken by the government and sold for the taxes he owed. This was a disaster, because George and his family had run out of money. His first farm crops were needed to feed his family through the coming winter. If he sold them for the tax money, his family would starve.

Seeking out solutions to his dilemma, George learned that just over the border in the state of Indiana, several farmers were hiring workers at harvest time to "bring in their crops." With this in mind, he traveled to Indiana, secured the promise of a "farm-hand position during harvest time," and went home to finish planting his own fields.

After his mid-summer work was finished, he packed his bags, left his wife to "hold the homestead together," and went to Indiana. Working from daylight to dusk, George toiled in another farmer's fields, tended his livestock and at harvest time helped him "reap the crops." Exhausted, muscle bound from all the physical labor, and tanned, George returned to his wife and children in Michigan with the tax money in his pockets. He was dreading the late summer harvesting job that awaited him. He was surprised to discover that most of his own harvest had already been collected by his brother (William Bedford) and brother-in-law (William Smith). The next day, George traveled to the town of Cassopolis, the "county seat," and paid those taxes. Then he went home, and "set about finishing his own harvest."

By late fall, George was "worn-out" and "tired beyond human endurance,." Winter and the cold offered a welcome reprieve. However, it was far from idle. Deer, wild turkey and geese had to be hunted for meat, as George could not afford to order and buy cows or chickens for the farm. Trees were felled by ax, firewood was cut and split, and wheat grain was stored out of the reach of rodents.

His wife and children had picked, and canned (using wax to top the jars), or dried, wild Michigan strawberries, raspberries, blackberries, grapes, grape leaves, and paw paws during the summer. Fall mushrooms were dried. Maple sap was boiled down to make maple syrup, wheat and corn flour was hand ground, and garden vegetables were preserved. Strips of salted dried fish, beef jerky, and venison hung in bags from the rafters. Wild herbs, medicine plants, and sassafras bark (for sassafras tea) were stuffed in sacks. Self-sufficiency was a way of life in this era.

It took George 6 years to turn his fledgling farm into a prosperous enterprise. As he cleared forests, planted additional fields, and reaped more harvests, his financial well being blossomed. He nurtured an expanding cattle herd, and sold his farm's produce to the settlement towns improving the situation further. His wife Ann, during this time, gave birth to more children, and focused on "barnyard husbandry." Flocks of chickens, ducks, and geese free ranged. Goats and caged rabbits provided protein variety and additional revenue.

George and Ann started involving themselves in the local pioneer community, church activities and politics. In 1846, George Bedford helped establish the Indian Lake Cemetery in Silver Creek Township. He served on the township board, and became involved in township governance.

On May 15, 1848, George bought eighty more acres of land bordering his property. He now

farmed 160 acres, and helped his mother and brother with her forty acres. He purchased a McCormick Reapers to cut and harvest grain, which reduced his harvest time from many days to hours. He expanded his farming activities to include an apple, plum, pear and cherry orchard. By now hired farm workers reduced his labor even more. William Bedford, George's brother, married and moved to Pokagon. His mother then lived with George's family, and her house and farm were share cropped to tenants.

Due to his wife's alliances, George had always maintained a friendly relationship with the local Potawatami, Indians. The majority of these native souls, as time passed, slowly integrated into the larger community. He often bartered with them or sold them his farm produce. Then the U.S. Army arrived in Dowagiac, and informed local authorities that they were ordered by the President of the United States and the U.S. Congress to escort all "stragglers" (those who hid during past forced removals) to reservations out west. Confrontational town meetings were held, arguments with Army officers were heated, and threats were made if the locals did not cooperate. George was sequestered to reluctantly participate in the injustice. In the end, the last of the local Indians (except the Pokagons) were cleared out of Cass County.

In 1852, George's second brother, John S. Bedford, migrated from New York, and settled in Pokagon Township, and then moved to Howard Township, Cass County, Michigan in 1853. Now George's entire family was close by and prospering. The Bedfords were known as generous, kind and respected members of the community. George had periodically expanded the log cabin to accept and accommodate his growing family. Now he was financially secure enough to build his wife a new framed home, which he did.

The Civil War broke out in 1861. George Bedford was 48 years old at the time. He was a farmer, providing needed food stuffs to local communities, a father of eight children requiring support, and approaching age 50, so he did not enlist. However, William Bedford, George's patriotic brother did, despite his age. George was quite worried about his brother, but could do little but pray for his safe return. William Bedford was made a private, and served as a soldier until he was wounded. On August 3, 1863, he was discharged from active duty for a disability, and served the remainder of his enlistment time behind combat lines. The north, of course, won the war, slavery was abolished, and the Civil War was brought to an end. On July 28, 1865, William Bedford was mustered out of service, and returned home.

In 1872, George's mother Sarah Anne Seward Bedford (1790-10/17/1872) died. She was buried, at her request, in Riverside Cemetery, Dowagiac, Michigan.

In 1879, the Dowagiac Union Fair Association was organized to provide yearly fall fair-ground activities for the region. Children were encouraged to raise farm animals, and complete farm projects, which were displayed and judged for prizes. Horse races and athletic events were held. Women baked pies, made jam preserves and competed for blue ribbons. Fund raisers and "hawkers sold food and trinkets." Live entertainment, dances and music were provided as a celebration for bountiful harvests. By year number two, George Bedford was elected to serve as the second vice-president of the organization.

Despite, many inventions of the era and the arrival of the train in Dowagiac, George's family, like everyone else, relied on horses and buggies, covered wagons, and their own equestrian skills for most transportation. The entire family were excellent riders and "appreciated well bred horses."

In 1881, George (age 68 ) and Ann (age 67) faced one of several serious tragedies in their lives; widowed daughter Jane (Jennie) E. Bedford died at 30 years of age. It was a lingering death and the family was deeply troubled by Jane's suffering. She was buried at Indian Lake Cemetery. George and Ann took into their home Jane's two young children, Guy Wesley Hawks and Earl Bedford Hawks. The rest of the family finally decided that the care of these two siblings was a difficult task for their aging

grandparents, and took over the responsibility. Jane's death effected George deeply, and soon after the death, he retired from farming, relying on his sons and managers to run the family business.

On Januay 28, 1889, George Bedford, died at age 75 years. Devoted to her husband, Ann Barton Smith passed away ten days later, on February 7, 1889 at age 74 years. Their children buried the couple in the family burial lot at the Indian Lake Cemetery, Silver Creek Township, Cass County, Michigan.

In summary, George Bedford migrated to Silver Creek Township in 1841. He started his pioneer adventure with high energy and ambition, overcame many obstacles, and became a successful, prominent citizens in the area. As an original settler, he helped shape the development of the rural Dowagiac area, Silver Creek Township and Sister Lakes region. He, his wife, their children, and their large extended Bedford, Conklin, Hawks, Gilbert and Garrett family formed a power base that was both influential and extensive. George Bedford's family has lived in Southwestern Michigan for ten generations, and his pioneering heritage remains a part of Cass County, Michigan history.

Copyright © 2011 by J. M. Watson

---

#### RESEARCH

- Bedford/Conklin/Hawks/Gilbert/Garrett Family Genealogy & History Files
- Obituary of George Bedford, News Democrat, Sat. 2/2/1889
- Obituary of Ann Smith, Dowagiac Daily News
- Cass County, MI Birth/Death Records, Land Title & Tax Records, 1860/1870 Plat Maps
- Portrait & Biographical of Berrien & Cass County, MI, Biographical Pub. 1893, Chicago
- U.S. Federal Census of Cass Co., MI
- 20th Century History of Berrien & Cass Co., MI by Judge Coolidge of Niles (1907)
- History of Cass County, MI" by Alfred Mathews (1852-1904), pub. Waterman & Watkins, 1882,
- Indian Lake Cemetery, Silver Creek Township, Cass Co., MI - DAR Burial List & Cass Co., MI Genealogical Society Web Site
- Lincolnshire, England Family Roots & Genealogy Internet Search
- History of Cass County, Michigan 1825-1875, pub. by Cass Co. Genealogy Society
- History of Cass County, Michigan 1852-1904, pub. by Cass Co. Genealogy Society
- Dowagiac's Cardinal Charlie Remembers by Charles D. Gill, pub. 2007, Johnson Graphics Decatur, MI
- Ancestry.com Family Trees - Bedford, Hawks, Page, Conklin, Gilbert, Garrett, Mumaugh, Steadman, Blackman, Wilson, Brandenburg, Hosford, McClellan, Cory, Harrison, Carpenter, Wells & Owen
- "Memories Of My Grandfather" by Guy Wesley Hawks
- "Uncle John Bedford's Journal" written by John W. Bedford
- Author's Local History/Family Lore/Legends Of The Past/Genealogy Files