

New England Yankee Pioneers

Ira H. Sturdevant was born in Thimmon, Rutland County, Vermont, on April 28, 1792. His parents were Caleb Sturdevant, a veteran of the American Revolution, and Miriam Howe. Altogether, Caleb and Miriam had eleven children, of whom Ira was the fifth.

Ira's Building Skills

In February 1813, Caleb moved his family to Ellipton, Jefferson County, New York, which had recently been opened for settlement. One of Ira's younger brothers recalled how Ira built a log shanty 18 by 24 feet "without nails or sound of hammer." He split basswood for the floor, "while the fire-place was the bare ground in one corner of the room.... Not a nail was used in this primitive home; but everything was axe-bewn and fastened with wooden pins" that Ira whittled with a pocket knife. In spring, Ira and two brothers also cleared a couple of acres of forest land for planting crops.

War of 1812 Service

When news came in May, 1813 that British forces were approaching nearby Sacket's Harbor, 20-year-old Ira joined other Americans in its defense. Serving as a militiaman under Capt. Gad Akeley, he fought in the second Battle of Sacket's Harbor on 29 May. Years later, Ira's son Lafayette would tell his own grandson Frank how Ira described the British cannon fire chopping off trees just above his head and how one of his comrades was scalped by Indian allies of the British.

Starting a Family

Ira married Asenath Lilly, daughter of Revolutionary War veteran John Lilly and Roxanna Bates on December 31, 1813. The couple lived in Ellipton until the mid-1820s, when they moved with five children (Emmaline, Seth, William, James, and Irene) to Mira Corners, Chautauq County, New York. At that location, they had another three children (Aona, Lucy, and John Lafayette). Their ninth child, Caleb, was born in 1836 near the village of Cory in Erie County, Pennsylvania. Presumably, Ira and Asenath had moved there temporarily to help her aging parents who lived there.

Moving To Iowa

During the 1840s, Ira's family began a westward trek across Ohio and Indiana, where Seth died in 1847. Ira and Asenath settled at Windham's Grove, Stephenson County, Illinois. Some of their children, by then married with families of their own, farmed in nearby McHenry County.

Around 1851, two of Ira's sons, William and John Lafayette, went to Iowa. There they worked with oxen to plow land near Quasqueton for a man named Hoover. When a group of Indians came by, the brothers inquired if there was any fertile land northward, and the Indians directed them up the Red Cedar River. William and Lafayette eventually came upon a beautiful vista as they stood on a bluff overlooking what is today Cedar Lane north of Waverly. They resolved to encourage their loved ones in

Illinois to move to this place as soon as possible. Indeed, the 1852 Iowa census records William as already resident.

Pioneering Waverly

In 1854, Ira and Asenath Sturdevant, joined by their grown children and their families, all moved from Illinois to Bremer County, Iowa. William already had purchased 80 acres on the west bank of the Cedar River and constructed the Ida House, a hotel of sorts, where many of the family stayed until they could get settled in their own homes. Ira claimed 48 acres immediately south of William's land as part of his bounty rights for War of 1812 service. Fronting the river, their street became Water (later First). Some of his children settled east or north of the new village of Waverly.

Ira, perhaps assisted by one of his sons-in-law who was a brick-mason, erected a two-story brick house during 1855-6 on the northeast corner of his 40 acres. In 1857, he added a barn. When passing Indians or any travelers needed a place to stay the night, Ira and Asenath invited them to sleep near the fireplace, which still exists. Not long after Waverly's incorporation, Ira and his son William declared their lands additions to the city, deeding rights of way to the community for streets and alleys. These sections remain the Ira and William Sturdevant Additions.

Military and Cemetery Traditions

War came in 1861. Four Sturdevant men marched off to serve, but only Lafayette came back alive. William survived the entire war, died from a burst carbuncle on his way home, and was buried on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi River near Helena, Arkansas.

*William Sturdevant,
ca 1863*



Meanwhile, Ira had died from consumption (tuberculosis) in his brick home on April 12, 1867.

His widow Asenath followed on May 7, 1867. Both lie in the original Sturdevant family plot in Waverly's Harrington Cemetery, where five generations of their descendants, many of whom lived in the Ira and William Sturdevant Additions, also rest in peace.

Beginning in 1868 with Lafayette, the Sturdevant family placed flags on veterans' graves in all the local cemeteries each Memorial Day. The veterans' organizations purchased new flags as old ones wore out, and the family tradition continued unbroken with Lafayette's grandson Frank, great-grandson Wendell, and great-great grandson Rick, through 1975. Always citizen soldiers, Sturdevant men answered their country's call to arms in nearly every major war: Lafayette in the Civil War; Frank in WWI; Wendell in WWII,

and Rick during the Vietnam conflict. Rick continues to serve as a civilian historian with the Air Force.



Lafayette & Sarah Sturdevant, ca 1900

The Sturdevants and Waverly

Ira and Asenath Sturdevant, and their descendants, gave much to make Waverly a community and, in turn, received much from their friends and neighbors. Ira's grandson Ed Sturdevant, a talented carpenter, built many fine staircases in some of the town's Victorian homes. Ed's son Frank, a beloved mailman, played violin beautifully for local gatherings and many weddings at the Little Brown Church. Frank's son Wendell worked for Schiele Baritan Company before becoming a city employee in the water, electric, wastewater, parks, and cemetery departments. Now, Wendell's son Rick proudly offers to share his family heritage with everyone in the community through Ira's house.



*Frank Sturdevant decorating Ira's grave
Harrington Cemetery on Memorial Day, c. 1949*