



# Ichabod's Diary

## A Window to His World

Note: "Ichabod's Diary: A Window to His World" is a follow-up article from the July/Aug 1994 issue of *Ancestry*, p. 28, entitled "Albro and Ichabod."

—Eds.

I drove down the single track dirt road heading west toward Lake Champlain. The Adirondack mountains rose gently in the distance, reflecting the early morning light, soft and pink. The year was 1992 and I was on a road trip trying to locate the New England farmlands of my ancestors. I was alone. As the warmth of the sun streaming in the rear window encircled my shoulders, I noticed a small, white farmhouse and a gray barn surrounded by dried corn stalks.

I stopped the car and checked my position on the Whiting, Vermont township map dated

1800. I squinted to read the faded names next to tiny blocks denoting farmhouses. The hair on my arms stood on end—could this be the original farm of Ichabod Foster? Ichabod, born in 1740 in Attleborough, Massachusetts, is my great-great-great-grandfather.

I knocked on the farmhouse door, hoping someone was home. A tall, solid-looking man with grayish-white hair and large, blue eyes, fresh as a frosty morning, answered my knock.

"Did Ichabod Foster ever live here?" I asked.

The man replied, "He built this house a

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the house. The original steep steps leading to the children's sleeping loft were visible only from an upstairs closet. I pictured Ichabod sawing, pounding, and molding each rough, ladder-like step. They had been sealed off when wider stairs were added for easier access to an expanded sleeping area.

I left Whiting with a roll of pictures, a sense of place in time and history, and a handful of black earth stuffed in my jacket pocket, damp and warm between my fingers. But I learned very little about Ichabod that day.

For twenty years I had searched for proof that he had a son named Albro, born 16 October 1785 in Rutland, Vermont. My uncle Warren had entrusted me with tattered old notes from his uncle Ellery Newton Foster, a veteran of the Battle of Shilo, who had copied all the birth, marriage, and death dates of the Fosters from my father, Morgan, born in 1897, back to Albro whose parents were never mentioned (nor were they named in his War of 1812 military records or his obituary printed in the *Medina County Ohio Gazette* 17 May 1874). Albro is my great-great-grandfather.

If Ichabod was Albro's father, my genealogy voyage would be charted back four more generations to Puritan Massachusetts in the time of the Pilgrims. I felt like a traveler trapped at the river's edge without a bridge to cross. The evidence I collected from land deeds, census records, church minutes and graveyards was all circumstantial. I had found Ichabod's farm, but had reached a dead end with no primary source material left to examine.

One summer evening last year I was surfing the Internet in my office on Lopez Island in Washington state, looking for replies to my genealogy request for information about Ichabod and Albro. I had placed periodic inquiries in cyberspace, never receiving a reply, but this time I hit a high-tech connection to my past. An e-mail was waiting from Cynthia, a woman in Oklahoma City who said she was my fifth cousin. She had Ichabod's diary that dated from 1785 to 1808. Questions popped into my head like sparks around a campfire. What did he write about? Was Albro mentioned?

After several e-mail messages and telephone conversations, Cynthia and I agreed to meet in Salt Lake City. We planned to spend our days at the LDS Family History Library and our evenings reading Ichabod's diary. When we met at our motel, we hugged and giggled as if we were old school friends, marveling at our good fortune. Cynthia had red hair and brown eyes. She didn't look at all like me. "Oh,



long time ago."

I was as excited as a school girl winning the class spelling bee. I told the man, George Senecal, that my name was Foster, too, and that I was searching for information about my family. He invited me in. His wife, Belle, a plump woman wearing a white, embroidered apron over a blue, flowered house dress, peered around the parlor door. Pausing a moment, she asked if I would like a cup of coffee.

The three of us sipped instant Sanka as we walked through the house. Two upstairs bedrooms, a large living room, and an inside kitchen had been added since 1796. George pointed to the kitchen beams and wide wall boards, explaining that they had originally been outside because families in those days feared the cooking fire might ignite

well," I thought, "lots of gene pooling since Ichabod's day."

Cynthia opened her large, black purse and handed me the diary. "My daughters want you to have this," she said. "You are a Foster. I'm not, really. I'm adopted."

I didn't care if she was adopted. And how did she know that I wasn't? We sat down and gently removed the diary from its brown paper wrapping. The frail pages were laced together with thin, hemp-like cord, crisscrossing to form a binding. The diary was so small I could cup it in the palm of my hand. The ink had turned brown, and the soft beige pages had grown brittle with age. His penmanship flowed with artistic grace as he recorded the events of each day in narrow, tiny rows across unlined pages—one page each month.

I wondered where he found paper and ink and a pen in the wilds of Vermont years before statehood, during the unsettled times when Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys roamed the countryside and soldiers marched along Crown Point Road, passing in front of Ichabod's farmhouse en route to nearby battles of Hubbardston and Fort Ticonderoga.

Curling up on the bed, trying to decipher the Old English script, Ichabod's world slowly opened before my eyes. He wrote about friends who visited, about farming and shoe-making, about wildlife in the woods, and about planting cucumbers, corn, wheat, peas, beans, turnips, even tobacco and melons. He recorded the fields in which he planted them—the upper, the one behind the barn, and the one on the east side of the house.

Ichabod wrote that he cured piles with pine knots split and boiled in two gallons of water.

October 1785 page of Ichabod's Diary. Note the Oct. 16<sup>th</sup> mention of Albro's birth: "At one of the clock in the morning we have a son born."

## He was a risk-taker in the wilderness who keenly observed his natural surroundings. He was my kind of person.

He used beech bark, red nettles, strong vinegar, salt peter and mum gum powder to stop a bleeding cut. Entries were accented with tiny sketches of ships under sail, books of the Bible, birds in flight and cows in love, fish swimming, flowers in full bloom, toads, frogs and peepers sounding off. Every spring the return of the first robin was noted. It was always in the month of March. He tracked the wild geese going north. July was the month his spotted cow "took the bull." Weather was described in three words or less—clear, squally, fair and pleasant, heavy snow. Ichabod was a man connected to the cycles of life and his natural world.

He read the Bible from Genesis to Revelations three times. Each time he finished he sketched a row of little books across the page, noting significant verses, such as Romans 8:20—"For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope." And 1 John 1:8—"If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in use." At the bottom of one page he wrote "PROSTITUTION", alone, in large script. Ichabod sounded concerned with sin.

In one of his last entries, 23 April 1807, he wrote: "There are 1,169 chapters in the Bible and to read them in thirty-one days you must read thirty-four and a half chapters in a day." He never missed a day with his diary in twenty-two years. His penmanship remained steady and strong. A few days after his sixty-eighth birthday he wrote his last entry in the diary. I don't know if he started another.

Ichabod's writings reveal an educated, observant, disciplined man who recorded facts but ignored feelings. He was a risk-taker in the wilderness who keenly observed his natural surroundings. He was my kind of person. If he were here today, I'm confident he would join me in my treks in the Yukon Territory and in my expeditions in the Himalayan

mountains. He showed me that Fosters traveled on the edge centuries even before I was born. It is in our genes.

Ichabod was seventy-one in 1811 when his last land deed was registered in Vermont. I don't know where he died or if a gravestone rests somewhere with his name on it, but tracing my family has linked me in universal space and time to a pioneer I never met but now know so well. He solved a mystery for me, too. In his diary, Ichabod wrote that in the early hours of the morning his son, Albro, was born. The date was 16 October 1785. ▲

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