

John Hill and Susan Braund: life in Canada

Branch 13

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My great, great grandparents John Hill and Susan Braund and six children settled in Ontario about a year after Canada became a country. When I thought about their rural lives, I must confess that I had visions of the life I knew on the Canadian prairies where one can gaze ten or twenty miles in all directions across the flat landscape and see only one farmhouse. I researched the region that the Hills settled in and, well, I had to reset my preconceptions. This is their story as assembled from the available records.

John Hill and Susan Braund were born in Devon (Beaworthy and Northlew) around 1827-1828. Both were living in Northlew at the time of their marriage (Sep 30, 1851). Later they moved to the Parish of Calstock in Cornwall where their first six children were born: William (1853), Charlotte (1855), John Henry (1858), Alfred Walter (1860), Frederick George (1865) and Rosa Ellen (1867). John was a farm labourer.

In 1868 Susan and her six eldest children embarked from Liverpool on the SS. Moravian and arrived in Canada in October (port unknown – but likely Montreal or possibly Halifax). The Hills were headed to Mariposa Township in Victoria County, Ontario and likely travelled the remaining distance by train. John Hill was not on the ship's passenger manifest and I'm going to suggest it was because he was already in Canada working as a farm labourer and had travelled earlier for work when he was most needed in the spring of 1867 or 1868. William was 14 when he arrived in Canada and said to be a labourer. Possibly he helped support the family in Cornwall in his father's absence.

By European standards, Victoria County was very young in 1868. The County was divided into a number of townships including Mariposa Township, which was about nine by fifteen miles in size and subdivided into four communities: Mariposa, Manilla, Oakwood and Little Britain.

Mariposa Township had been surveyed for lots around 1820 and offered for sale for about \$1-2 per acre. The 740 lots consisted of narrow tracts of land - longer than they were wide, and not very large. The Township was endowed with beautiful streams and rivers, valuable old oak and maple forests and fertile soil. Less of a favourable endowment was its rolling hills with some lowlands having the tendency to be swampy.

Homesteading in the early days of Mariposa would have been very isolating and the risks great from wild animals (bears and wolves) and the elements. However, by the time that Susan Hill née Braund and her children arrived in Mariposa Township, the population was about 5000 and the region quite well developed.

Public records suggest that the Hill family prospered in Mariposa. Although John was a farm labourer in 1871 he was a landowner by the 1881 census, as was William, married by then to Mary Jane Cowle (Cole) and father of two small daughters. Land title maps of 1892 show J, J H and W Hill as owners of plots of land in Mariposa (John and sons John Henry and William). William and Mary Jane relocated to the Manitoba prairies where abundant homesteading farmland was available by application. Many of John and Susan's other children would also head to Manitoba or further west.

About 1872, John, Susan and children dressed in their finest for a family portrait. The youngest child, Olivia Ann, who was born in Mariposa in March 1870, was a toddler at the time the photo was taken. Nearly 20 years later, William and Mary Jane would gather their family for a similar portrait. Both portraits were passed on through generations of William's family.



The 1890s were a time of adversity for the Hills. In February 1891, William's young wife died, leaving him alone to care for six children and run his farm. In late winter of 1895, Susan Braund contracted meningitis, which caused her death on May 12. John Hill does not seem to have been nearby when she died, as it was a neighbour who registered Susan's death. This was common in communities when older people had no family around to help them. I could find no suitable death record in Canada for John Hill except one recorded at the Mimico asylum of a John Hill, born in England, aged 73 in January 1899 whose occupation had been farmer.

When our shuttered businesses and agencies reopen, I will attempt to obtain John's medical

records and probate records for a Susan Hill of Victoria County. I would like to uncover details about what happened in their final years. I hope to discover if my hunch is correct that John suffered some illness or injury that incapacitated him so that he could not be cared for at home. I also hope to see how the Hill's estate was finalized and perhaps learn how William Hill (my great grandfather) and his family managed in the immediate years following Mary Jane's death.

I have developed great respect for the people who came to build new lives in Canada – for their resiliency and the sacrifices they made for the generations of Canadians that came after them.