

# One Night Lost in the Conneaut Woods



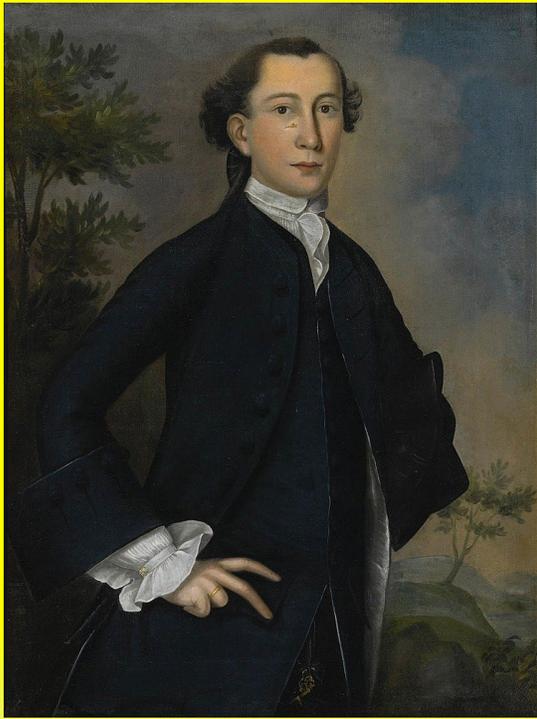


I seek the Lake Erie shore, because father and mother and my sisters and I came to this new place called Salem in a batteaux and the music of the waves resounds in my ears. I seek the Lake Erie shore because Orange Tabby and I are lost in these tree meadows, and I want to go home!

I know to follow the winding creek that father and mother called Conneaut Creek to find the lake. I know to follow Orange Tabby my cat, who had sailed with us on the lake. I want to go back home

If I follow Conneaut Creek and Orange Tabby, I will find the lake. Already, I hear the sound of the waves and my toes in my tight cowhide shoes twitch, anticipating the feel of beach sand. I walk faster, thinking just as fast and remember what Reverend Simpson told me after he baptized me at the camp meeting by Conneaut Creek.



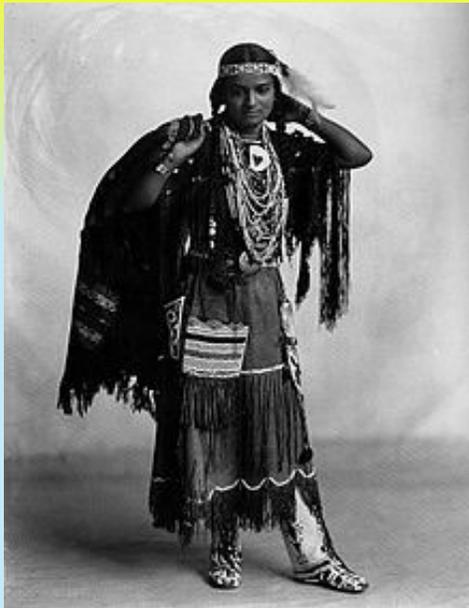


Cold lake water ran down my face. Shaking my head and splattering drops of water on the Reverend's sleeve, I watched him talk to an Indian he had baptized after me. The Indian looked like he got baptized deeper than I did. He dripped water from his leggings and his feathers drooped half-mast.

“He is telling me of the Erietz people who once lived here. The Iroquois destroyed them after they cheated in running races,” Reverend Simpson explained. “They left their name and memories of their lives on our lake, Lake Erie, and its shores.”



I listened to his Eriez story, because his heart for the Indian people shown in his eyes and rang in his voice, and I looked more closely at the Indian. Reverend Simpsons gaze directed mine and I focused on the Indian's face and words instead of the hatchet hanging from his belt and his hair waving in the wind like a flag instead of laying smoothly on his forehead like...well, like it does on the head of Thomas Bentley.





I squared my shoulders even though they are soggy from my cape. Thomas Bentley. Our families sailed from New York on the batteaux with us. I remember lazy sunny afternoons, the waves lapping against the sides of the boat. I read *The Children of the Abbey* by Miss Regina Maria Roche, and I felt Amanda's love for Lord Mortimer. I looked over the top of my book, darting a quick glance at Thomas who helped our father steer the batteaux. I have fought with him since I was old enough to chop wood, fire a gun, and inform mother that I did not intend to marry.



I would write books like the Children of the Abbey and become independently wealthy. I stole a second glance at Thomas. The muscles of his arms rippled like strong waves as he and our fathers propelled the batteaux toward our new homes in Conneaut. He looked over at me and I quickly buried my nose back in my book.

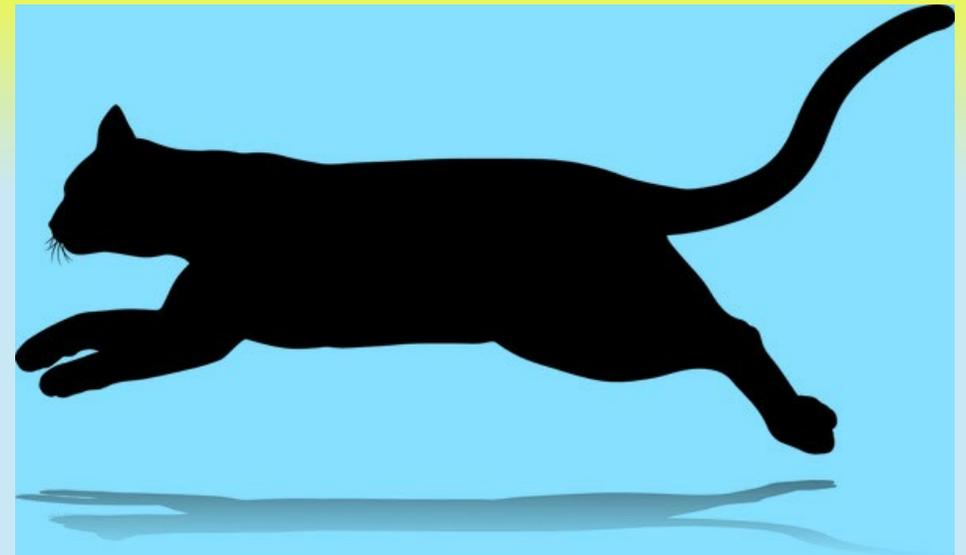
The setting sun sent fingers of colored light dancing on the waves. I imagined I see Erietz Indians canoe dancing over the water. I wanted to be gliding their watery ballet with them, not standing dripping on the shore.

Mother settled my warm wool cape around my shoulders.. “You and Orange Tabby quickly follow us home. You need to change those wet clothes before you catch your death of cold!”



“Get your feet moving, Sally!” My Sister Rachel thumped me on the shoulder, creating a Lake Erie shower. Most of it landed on Orange Tabby, who streaked into the woods like mice taunting her from the trees. I ran after her, squishing water with each step. “Orange Tabby, come back!” My voice sounded watery in my ears.

“My child, come back!” Reverend Simpson shouted. His is the last human voice I hear that day.





Now lost in these woods chasing Orange Tabby I hear crows cawing, mosquitoes buzzing, mysterious growling, and Orange Tabby screeching her feline battle cry.. I run after her, certain she is running home to our cabin. She streaks past deeply green trees with bold branches that slap me in the face as I try to catch her. My lungs fill with night air and tree shadows surround me. “Orange Tabby, you have far exceeded our cabin. Let’s stop and retrace our steps!” I shout.



Orange Tabby keeps running. I peer through the gathering darkness, trying to find Conneaut Creek. If I can find the creek, I can follow it either to the Lake or home. Either way is acceptable to me. I can't find Conneaut Creek. It is dark in the woods now, a darkness that I can feel. This darkness is not velvet like the darkness in *The Children of the Abbey*.. It is thick like mother's stew and full of question marks. What and who does it hide?



I hear a growl behind me.

“Orange Tabby, is that you? Stop squawking and let us head for home. If we walk together, we should find the way.”

Instead of purring and rubbing against my cape, which all of the running through the woods had comfortably dried, Orange Tabby growls again. Another growl answers her. I follow what I think is Orange Tabby’s growl. But she streaks from behind me like a shooting star. I hear a thump and then the screech of Orange Tabby’s battle cry.

The growling fades away something runs heavily through the brush.

Confused, I follow it for a few paces until I feel Orange Tabby rubbing against my skirt. I grab her and hug her.

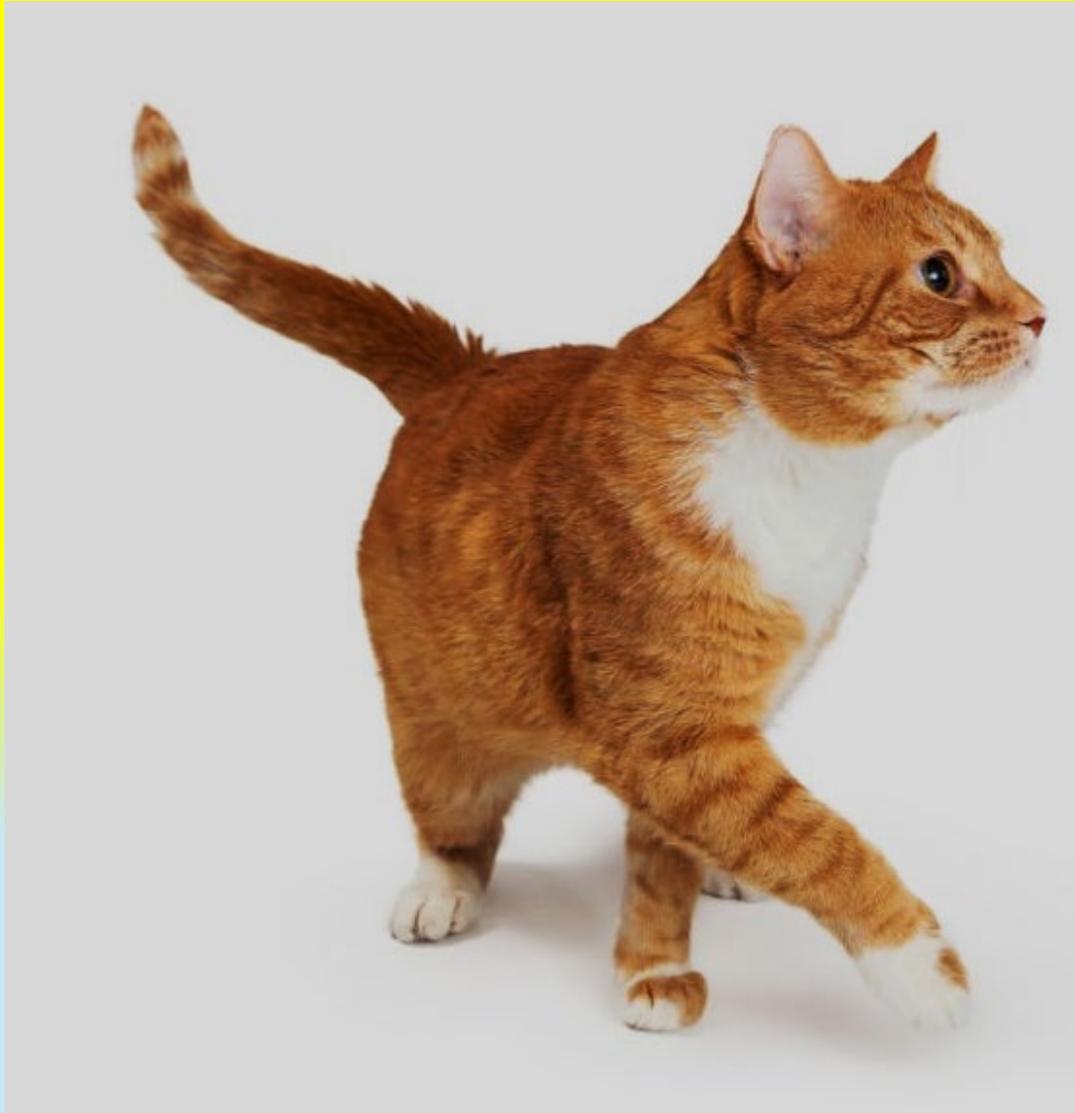
I jerkily stroke Orange Tabby's fur. "That was just a bear following us. Now, can we go home?"

Orange Tabby scuttles under a maple tree and I follow her. I bury my face in her fur and pet her. We sink into the darkness of sleep, surrounded by the darkness of the woods.





The sun rising over the treetops tickles my eyelids and for a minute I think I am in our cabin feeding wood to the wood stove to make the cornmeal mush for breakfast. Orange Tabby unwinds herself from around my neck where she has been sleeping. She gives herself a tongue bath and then stands in front of me meowing a command. Meekly, I follow her through the woods. She is light and can easily pass through the brush and saplings



I am heavier and have to push them aside. I fight valiantly, but after a time, I just want to sit on a log and rest.

Orange Tabby disagrees. She rubs against my legs until I get up and stumble along behind her. We travel through the woods that I am convinced have no end like the love that Reverend Simpson says that God has for us. Then I see water gleaming through the trees. Pushing the bushes aside, I run to Conneaut Creek.

But this isn't Conneaut Creek! It is just a tiny thin stream, thin as my hope of getting home. I sink down in a heap of disappointment and cover my face with my cape. The voice of my sweetheart floats over the shoulder of my torn cape and mends it with threads of hope. "Sally Montgomery! Get up and act like yourself."



I peer through a large tear in the cape. Orange Tabby is staring at something on the other side of the tiny stream. Or someone! I know who that someone is, but I won't say the words out loud. Instead, I jump up, snatch my cape, and run down the bank of the tiny stream. Thomas Bentley runs across from me, keeping perfect pace. "Sally Montgomery, get up and act like yourself!"





I hear my sister Rachel's voice. "Get your feet moving Sally!" I get my feet moving faster.

Realizing that he has made no inroads with me, Thomas turns to Orange Tabby. "Come here, Orange Tabby," he croons to her. That traitorous cat jumps across the stream, landing on his shoulder. She sits there smirking at me and purring. I keep running, but Thomas still keeps pace with me even with a cat on his shoulder. Finally, I can run no more. I sink under a maple tree, gasping for breath.



Thomas easily catches up with me. He pulls me to my feet. I ignore the touch of his hands, but they feel like a warm blanket.

“Come in and we will have a cup of tea.” Orange Tabby runs ahead of us. “Where are we going, Thomas?”

My cabin is just around the corner.” He puts a guiding arm around me.

His cabin sits in a sheltered nook but high enough from the stream to keep the water from invading it.

Before I know it, I am sitting in a rocker in front of a warm fire sipping a cup of tea. He sits on a stool in front of me. I remember that I had helped his mother embroider the daisies on it.

Thomas tucks a blanket around me. “Now, we will talk,” he says.

I glare at him. “Now, we will not talk,” I say to myself. Orange Tabby knows what I am thinking. She growls at me. I growl back.





“Everyone has been looking for you,” Thomas says. “I am so glad you are safe. Rest for a while, and then I will take you home.”

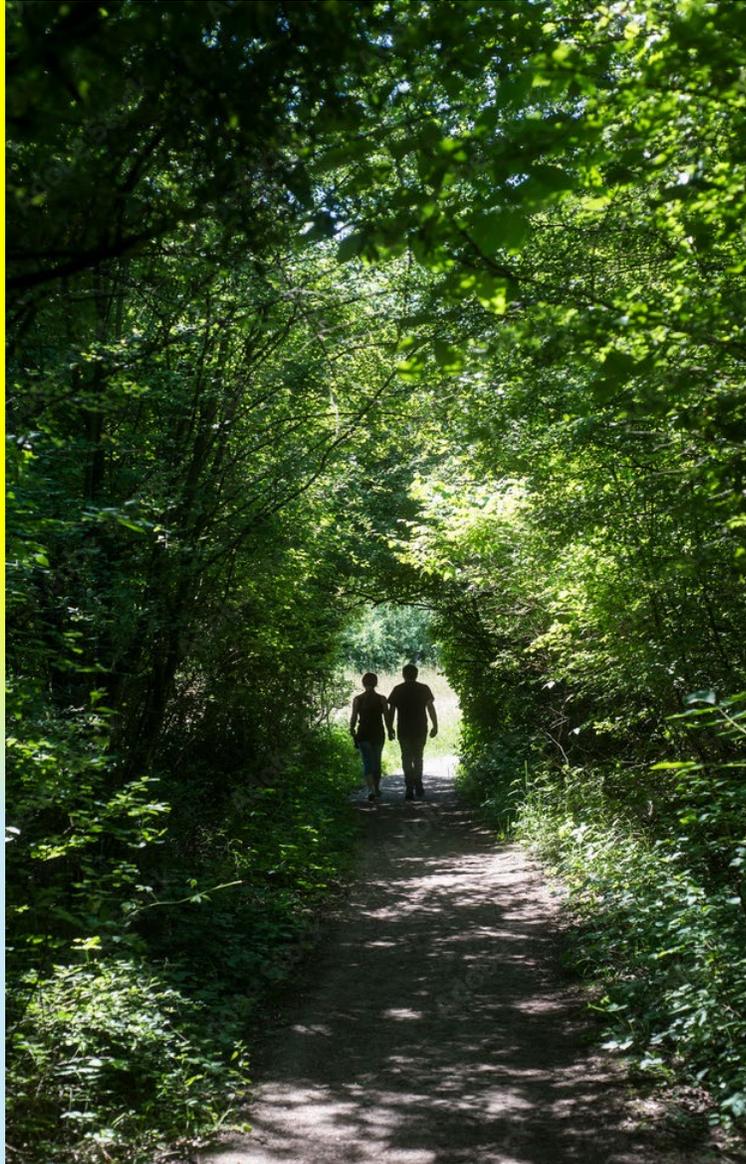
I do not get a smidgen of rest. Besides Orange Tabby, my thoughts also betray me. They tell me I am already home. I want to rise from my comfortable rocker and cook some corn bread and venison for Thomas. On the long winter evenings with snow covering the windows, I will rock in front of the fire, reading or knitting while Thomas sits polishing his boots with bear oil.

I run out of the cabin and whirl around not sure about which direction to take. Then, I remember. Lake Erie is north. I have to run north. I run north, with Thomas and Orange Tabby close behind. I am ready to stop running and sit on the nearest log when I hear father's shouting, "Sally!"



I don't answer. I just run into his arms. I peek around his elbow to make sure Thomas has followed me. Thomas smiles at father. "I found her," he said. "Now, I will have to marry her just to be sure she stays safe." Father gives Thomas permission to marry me. I do not, at least not yet.





I help Mother prepare a knapsack lunch for us to take on our wedding journey. Thomas and I have to walk thirty miles through the woods to Harpersfield so that Justice Avery can marry us.

“He is carrying the knapsack,” I tell mother as we walk down the dirt path toward the woods. Orange Tabby starts to follow us, but I pick her up and shut her in the barn. Her paws are still sore from our overnight adventure in the woods and her meow is hoarse from screeching at the bear.

Thomas and I walk along silently. I hear crows cawing and some rustlings in the thick underbrush, but I do not feel afraid, and I do not feel like running. Thomas is a steady rock beside me. Then I hear a different noise. A snuffling and growling noise that grows louder as we walk deeper into the woods.

I break the silence. “I know that noise.”

“I do too.” Thomas takes his gun out of the crook of his arm.

“Wait before you fire. Spare this bear,” I tell him.





“Why this bear?” Thomas asked.

“This bear snuffles like the one that led us to your cabin. I owe him a thank you.”

I screech like Orange Tabby and the snuffling stops. I hear the sound of a heavy body crashing through the underbrush.

Thomas laughs. “You scared that bear away with your screeching. Where did you ever learn how to do that?”

“You will soon enough find out since Orange Tabby is going to live with us.”



“Then you will marry me, and I am not taking this 30 mile walk just to walk?”

Would Amanda have said yes to Lord Malcomb’s proposal?

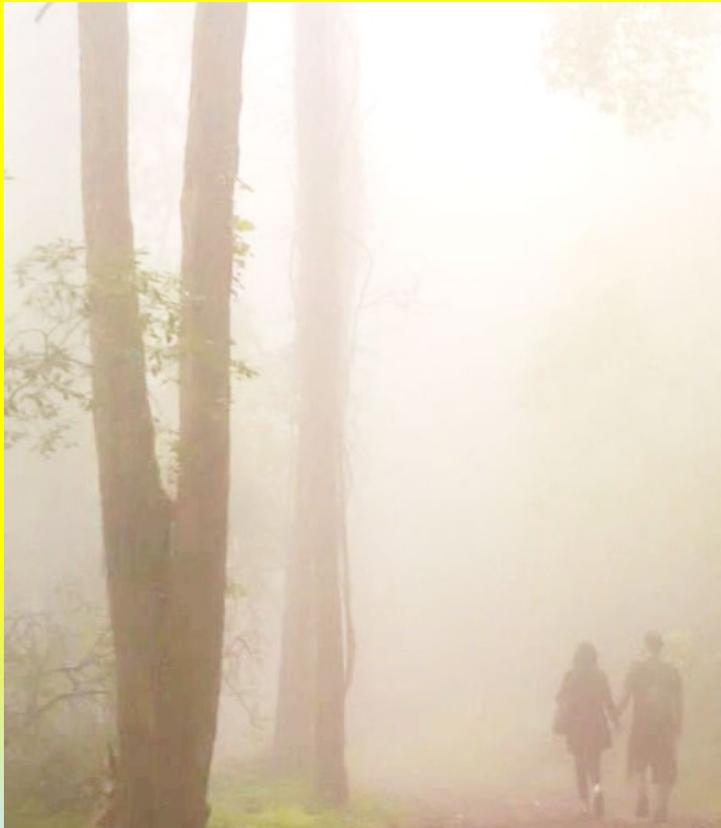
“I’ll think about it,” I said. “Sweetheart, “ I add under my breath.

We spend our honeymoon trip walking back thirty miles to the cabin Thomas built in the Conneaut woods. We talk about partners instead of the little wife. We talk about women voting sometime in the future and Thomas says he thinks it a good idea.

We finally arrive weary and footsore, back at the cabin in the woods. I run ahead and throw open the door. “Welcome home, sweetheart.”

I never did let Thomas carry me over the doorstep! We walked in together.



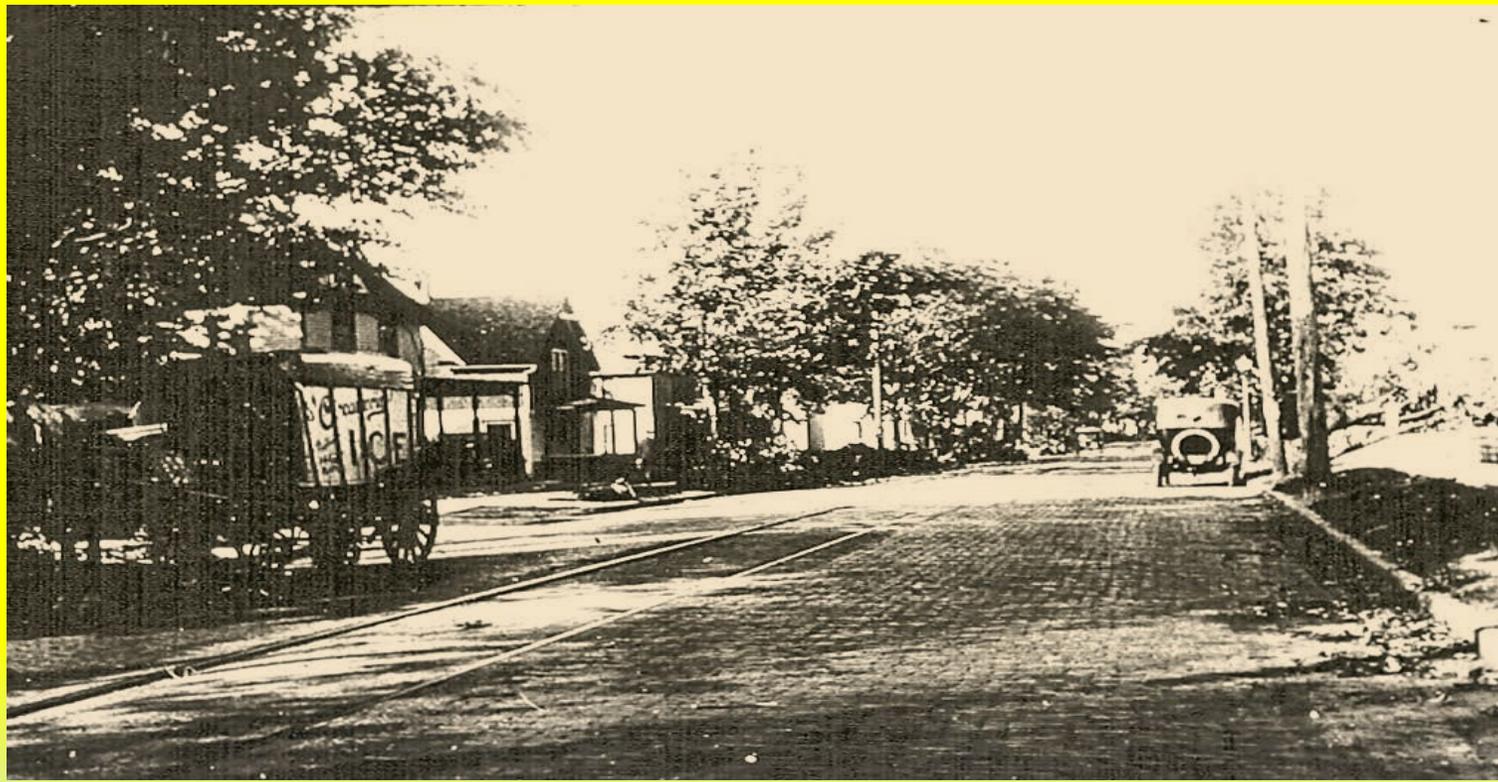


*From "Memorial to the Pioneer Women of the Western Reserve," Part IV, Mrs. Gertrude Van Rensselaer Wickham, Editor [Women's Department of the Cleveland Centennial Commission, February, 1897], p.p. 917-920.*

This fictional story is based on the true Conneaut story of Anna Montgomery and Aaron Wright, early Conneaut pioneers who were married in 1800. They had to walk through dense woods the thirty miles from Conneaut to Harpersfield for the Justice of the Peace to marry them. There was no Justice of the Peace in Conneaut. They also had to walk the thirty miles back to Conneaut through the same woods.

Reverend Simpson is based on Reverend Joseph Badge, a pioneer minister who worked with the Native Americans in what later became Ashtabula County.

Conneaut  
Area  
Historical  
Society  
P.O. Box 563  
Mill Street  
Conneaut,  
Ohio 44030



David  
Cummins  
Octagon House  
Liberty Street  
Conneaut,  
Ohio 44030



## Capturing Conneaut History

<https://capturingconneauthistory.com/>

[kathywarnes@gmail.com](mailto:kathywarnes@gmail.com)

