

Growing up on an Apple Farm, in Ransomville, NY

Honoring Henry Harrison Hand

by Jan Brooks Johnpier



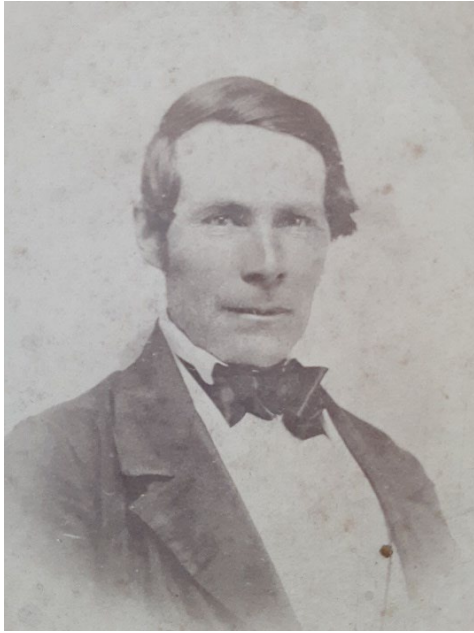
Picture from Brooks' Apple Farm with the

1985 Honda three-wheeler (ATC) – which still runs today!

I had the privilege of growing up in a small farming community north of Niagara Falls, New York, in a hamlet called Ransomville. Nestled in the Town of Porter in Niagara County, Ransomville is about 400 miles northwest of New York City and had a population of 1,418 as of the 2010 census.

My family's roots in Ransomville stretch back to its earliest days, when my second great-grandfather, Henry Harrison Hand, came up from Mississippi in the mid-1800s and purchased a large farm. Henry is the ancestor I honored when joining the National Society Descendants of American Farmers (NSDOAF)—because without him, I likely wouldn't have grown up on an apple farm in New York.

Henry was born on April 24, 1823, in Rushville, Ontario County, New York. His father, Eli Hand, served in the War of 1812, and his grandfather, Nathaniel Hand, fought in the American Revolutionary War. Shortly after Henry's birth, the family moved to the Niagara region. By the 1830s, Eli disappears from the historical record—whether he died or left the family remains unknown.



**Henry Harrison Hand**

Jan Johnpier's 2<sup>nd</sup> Great  
Grandfather

Around 1846, Henry's older brothers, Miles and Sheldon Hand, took charge and moved the family to Mississippi, seeking prosperity along the Gulf Coast. They settled on Bayou Bernard, later renamed Handsboro in honor of the Hand brothers and L.J. Burr, the town's founders. Miles and Sheldon built the first sawmill, foundry, and identical homes on the north side of the bayou. Their foundry famously produced New Orleans' iconic iron lace balconies and, in one year, manufactured 25 engines valued at \$62,500.

During this time, slave labor was unfortunately common—and the Hand brothers embraced it. But Henry did not. According to family history passed down from Henry's daughter, Helen Hand Sanger (my great-grandmother), Henry would visit the local tavern and openly criticize slavery. Concerned for his safety, Miles reportedly woke Henry one night, handed him a large sum of money, and told him to leave Mississippi and never return.

Henry returned to New York, purchased a large farm in Ransomville, and began anew. Still angry over his exile, he made one final trip to Handsboro to demand more money from his brothers. Arriving late at night, he called across the river for someone to row over and retrieve him. A slave woman responded, "I will be right there, Henry." Surprised, he asked how she recognized him. She replied, "Why, Henry Hand, I would know your voice anywhere—even in Heaven."

Henry never returned to Mississippi. He married Maria Johnson, hired local builder Alonzo Brookins to construct a beautiful farmhouse, and spent the rest of his life farming the land. That same farmhouse and farmland remain in our family today—and the land is still being farmed.

In the 1960s, my grandparents gifted 50 acres of the original farm to my parents, and my father planted an apple orchard. Growing up on that orchard was a true blessing. I have cherished memories of working alongside my family and enjoying my mother's delicious apple pies, sauce, muffins, crisp, and more.

Each fall, my mother gifted a bushel of apples to my schoolteachers and bus driver. I never failed a grade! I remember stepping off the school bus to the heavenly smell of fresh apple pie baking in the oven—served warm with a glass of milk.

Saturday mornings were special. I'd join my father at the local restaurant, where farmers gathered over coffee and breakfast to talk about their farms. I'd sip chocolate milk, nibble a donut, and soak in the stories. Then we'd head back home, where my father would head out to the orchard to work. Winter meant trimming trees; spring brought fertilizing; June was for thinning apples. My father handled the spraying himself to keep us safe from chemicals—I'd watch from the window as he drove the spray rig through the rows.

At age five, I learned to drive our Massey Ferguson 50 tractor. The clutch was stiff, and my father would shout, “Push it hard!” I even helped him repair the spray rig once—he lowered me into the tank to hold the light while he welded. I was scared, but I trusted him. Thankfully, that was a one-time adventure!

Harvest season was my favorite. From September through early November, we’d hang a sign by the road: “U-Pick Apples – Pick Brooks.” Families from all around would come to pick apples and spend the day on the farm. I loved meeting people and chatting about apples, farming, and the weather. Any leftover apples—including drops—were taken to the local juice plant to make cider.

Though the orchard was cut down in 2010, the land is still farmed. Today, we grow field corn (or “cow corn”), which is used to make silage—feed for livestock at a local dairy.

This land has shaped generations of my family—from Henry’s bold return to New York, to my own childhood among apple trees. It has been in our family since the mid-1800s, passed down through time like a treasured heirloom. It’s more than soil and crops—it’s a living legacy.