

Solomon Johns (1801 – 1884)

The second son of David and Sarah Johns, namesake of his grandfather Lieutenant Solomon Johns, was born in Elizabethtown, Leeds County, Ontario where his family lived during his childhood. When the family moved, about 1817, to Port Trent (now Trenton) in Northumberland County Solomon likely began working in the timber industry, possibly for his brother-in-law Sheldon Hawley.

In 1830 Solomon purchased a 200-acre lot two miles north of Marmora, known as Upper Canada's first mining town. Later, in 1831, he purchased an adjoining 100 acres. Also that year he acquired two lots east of Marmora Village, from his uncle, Solomon Johns Jr. Of these he immediately sold one half of each lot, retaining the remaining half lots until 1855 and 1871.

The Township of Marmora, an area rich in mineral resources, had been created in North Hastings County in 1821. The Marmora Iron Works was established, after the discovery of iron ore deposits, on Crowe Lake at the north end of the village in 1821, and by the following year "The Works", as it was called, was approaching peak production. By 1823 the Kingston Press was printing advertisements for lots for sale in Marmora. Whether Solomon bought his first lot in speculation of a possible population growth, resulting from the expected success of the Marmora mine, is unknown. It may be that the Johns family was looking for land to provide farms for all the sons. Available property in the front townships near the Bay of Quinte was scarce and many people were moving farther north to settle.

In the early 1830's Solomon, along with his parents and unmarried siblings, moved to Marmora where they homesteaded on his property, two miles north of the village. He and his brothers, and possibly their father, would have had to clear the land, as this area was heavily forested. They built a log house on this property, which became known as the David Johns Homestead. Their new home would likely have been of a good size because there were four adult sons and two daughters still living with their parents at that time.

Unfortunately, Solomon's older brother Daniel died in 1835. One possibility is that he met with an accident while logging. His property in North Marmora went first to his father David, heir at law, then to Sheldon Hawley, who sold that 400-acre tract, adjacent to Bartholomew's property, to Solomon in 1844. Nine years later Bartholomew purchased half of this tract from Solomon.

The production of potash was common in the early settlements. A visitor to Marmora in 1837 described the potash industry as providing the main export, at that time. Apparently this was a profitable source of revenue – the ashes of three acres of heavily timbered land would produce a barrel of potash, worth about six pounds sterling.¹ Potash kettles could be purchased from the Marmora Iron Works. It is entirely possible that the Johns men were producing potash while clearing their land.

We could presume that Solomon Johns had received some education during his youth. What we know about the man suggests, in part, that he possessed a certain amount of leadership ability. In 1836 he presented a petition on behalf of 46 others, of the Midland and Newcastle districts, to the House of Assembly of Upper Canada. As their spokesman, Solomon was "praying that the navigation of the River Trent be improved from its mouth to the Rice Lake"².

From 1833 to 1835 civil engineer N. H. Baird prepared a report regarding a canal system from the Bay of Quinte to Peterborough. He suggested that tolls charged to lumbermen and access to the Marmora Iron Works (that had been noted as being vital to the economy of all of Upper Canada) would offset the construction expenses. A committee of the Legislative Assembly reported in 1837 that the opening of navigation on the lower section of the river would be advantageous if only because the Marmora Iron

¹ "Historic Hastings" by Gerald E. Boyce, pgs. 124, 299

² Journal of the House of Assembly of Upper Canada from the 14th day of January to the 20th day of April, 1836.

Works could be re-opened. But, there were too many problems to overcome. In the early 1850's the Hastings County Council published Baird's earlier reports, and petitioned the Canadian Government to complete this project. However, the project did not go forth, and timber continued to be the main use of the River Trent. Slides, dams and booms aided the descent of timber³. The Trent Slide Committee was appointed in 1855 to manage the timber slides and dams⁴. During the latter half of the 19th Century roads and railways were built. It wasn't until 1920 that the Trent Canal was completed, well past the need for its intended use as a mode of transportation.

We know from the 1851 Ontario Directory that Solomon Johns was a Justice of the Peace. In this capacity he was able to draw up the many land documents of which he was a part. It is also possible that as a J.P. he performed the marriage ceremony for his sisters Emma and Maria, and Bartholomew's daughter Sarah, who were married in Marmora before the Anglican Church was established there. In 1847 Solomon drafted a Memorial to be registered with an Indenture of Bargain and Sale for a tract of land on the River Trent, at Port Trent. This document was in reality a Deed of Trust between George Bull, first, Bartholomew and Solomon Johns, and their brother-in-law William Hilton, Sr., second, and Emma Johns, third. It was in part, the prelude to a marriage between Solomon and Bartholomew's sister Emma and George Bull. The three men of the second part were given the use of the tract of land described in the Deed of Trust. Interestingly, Emma was allowed the right to present written directions to her brothers and brother-in-law regarding the extent of their use of the said property.

This tract of land was strategically located on the River Trent near its entrance to the Bay of Quinte. Here logs arrived by descending down the river from the forested areas to the north. At Port Trent the logs were sawn into lumber or re-raftered for shipment to the markets in Quebec. As well, squared logs were shipped south to the United States. In 1851 almost 15 million feet of timber was exported from Hastings County to the American market. In 1852 the Gilmour Company built a steam sawmill on their property across the river from George Bull's land. Lumbering was a lucrative occupation for farmers during the long winters.

George Bull had acquired part of this Port Trent riverside property from Sheldon Hawley, who had been operating a lumber business in this area for some time. It appears that Solomon, Bartholomew, and William Hilton, Sr. (who had married their sister Maria) were planning to take advantage of this income-producing situation. They may have had a sawmill on this property, or they were providing a service of re-raftering squared logs for export. It is also possible that they leased the land to someone else for that purpose. Incidentally, there was more than one occasion when Solomon borrowed funds from his brother-in-law William in the form of a mortgage on one of his properties.

Although he is listed as a farmer in the Marmora census from 1861 to 1881 and as a yeoman in the Hastings County Directory of 1869 and 1879, Solomon also played a leading role in the community. For four 2-year terms during the period of 1851 to 1873 Solomon Johns held the office of Reeve of Marmora Township⁵, long before the incorporation of the town of Marmora. In other years he was an active member of the council. One could assume that he encouraged his nephew Solomon, a son of the deceased Bartholomew Sr., to join him on the town council. Solomon Sr. and Solomon Jr. are both noted as councilors in 1869.⁶ During this time period a gravel road was built from Trenton to Frankford, and on to Stirling and Marmora, which would have provided a great improvement in transportation between Marmora and the Bay of Quinte region.

³ "Historic Hastings", Gerald E. Boyce, pgs. 168-169

⁴ Parks Canada, Trent-Severn Waterway Plan, "Evolution of the Waterway"

⁵ "Early Records of Marmora Township", compiled by W. J. Cottrell, Marmora Herald, 12 May 1932

⁶ Directory of the County of Hastings, 1868-69, pg. 305, "Marmora"

Solomon apparently did not marry, but he appears to have taken a role of provider in the family. His nephew William Hilton, Jr. came to live with him and help on the farm around 1861, according to William's obituary. Later, in 1871, Solomon sold one part of his land to William. Sarah, Solomon's mother, resided with him after she was widowed until her death in 1876.

On the 1881 census Susan Maria Johns is listed as living at Solomon's home. As Solomon was 80 years of age by then, it is likely that Susan kept house for him. In fact, she may have looked after Sarah before she died. A petition of Nancy Johns Hawley, Solomon's sister, mentions that Susan had worked very hard for Solomon. We have not discovered the relationship of Susan's father to this line of the Johns family.

Solomon Johns, son of David and Sarah, and a grandson of Solomon and Susanna, emerges from history as a man who was a kindly, caring person and a civic-minded citizen. As well he was a devout parishioner of St. Paul's Anglican Church in Marmora. A regular member of the vestry, he was re-appointed as churchwarden in March 1880. As that time he was also designated to be a lay delegate to the synod of the Anglican diocese of Ontario for a three-year term.⁷

Solomon died, at the age of 83, on the 29th of December 1884. A burial service was held on 31st December at St. Paul's Church.



Situated near the gravestone of David and Sarah Johns at Marmora Protestant Cemetery

IN
MEMORY OF

SOLOMON
JOHNS

DIED
DEC 29, 1884

AGED
83 YRS. 10 Ms

"BLESSED ARE THE
DEAD WHO DIE IN
THE LORD"

⁷ Stirling News-Argus, 02 April, 1880, pg. 2