

The Challenging Life of Perinton's English Annie

Ann Slade Hallett, or English Annie as she was known, endured a challenging life, to say the least. She was a survivor, through the highs and lows of a long, colorful life. Known as a little woman with a big voice, much of her story comes to us from her great-great granddaughter. Lois Gilbert has spent most of her life in Bushnell's Basin, and has studied her family history extensively. She visited me recently and told me about English Annie. She also shared vintage photos of members of the Hallett, Gilbert, Austin, and McCoord families, all of whom she is related to.

Ann Slade was born in Somerset, England, early in the 19th century. She married James Hallett, with whom she had nine children. They signed their marriage license with an "X", for neither could read or write. The Halletts left England for America in about 1848, and after living two years in West Henrietta, moved to Perinton, where they purchased a modest farm on the Pittsford-Palmyra Road. So modest, in fact, that the 1855 census referred to their home as a "shanty" valued at twenty dollars.



"English Annie" Hallett, in approximately 1900

From this humble start, the Halletts became significant landowners, primarily through the shrewd business instincts of English Annie. Land was bought and occasionally sold, usually with a mortgage attached. Eventually the shanty was replaced by a thirteen room home with large barns and an even larger mortgage. Annie had many irons in the fire. She ran a grocery store near the oxbow, serving those traveling and working on the canal. For a time she also operated a thriving coal yard. She did all this while raising children and working on the farm.

English Annie continued to run the farm quite productively after the death of her husband, with limited help from her son, William. Documents from 1880 valued the property at \$12,000, and recorded the sale of 3,600 bushels of potatoes, 950 bushels of apples, and 1,000 pounds of butter. But there were problems. Her properties were heavily mortgaged, and William was drunk more than he was sober. With his diminishing health, and her advancing age, Annie could no longer maintain her financial interests. Courts ordered the sale of her properties, and the homestead was sold at auction. By 1885, she and William were living along the canal bank in familiar surroundings, a shanty.

Somehow, English Annie continued to survive. When William died in 1893, the newspapers barely mentioned the event, referring to him only as “the son of English Ann, a well known character living in the south part of town.” By December of 1898, she was taken to the county poor house, and from there, to the Rochester State Hospital, where she resided until her death in 1905. English Annie outlived her husband and most of her children, and left a colorful legacy for her ancestors, including her great-great granddaughter, Lois Gilbert.

Written by Bill Poray, Perinton Town Historian

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