## The House Beside the Lake:
## Isaac Shipley and a Divided Family in Civil War–Era Pultneyville



The Shipley mansion has stood in Pultneyville for more than 175 years, overlooking the same stretch of Lake Ontario that once connected the village to ports across the water. Built in 1850, the brick Italianate house had gas lighting, coal-fired heating, and running water supplied by gravity. Its barns, iron fence, and substantial acreage reflected the prosperity of a family that had come to western New York from Yorkshire, England, in 1817.

Isaac Shipley was twenty-four when he built the house. By the late 1860s, he owned approximately 265 acres around Pultneyville. His family had established itself through farming and trade, taking advantage of the waterways that carried local produce to distant markets.

There is another part of the story, less readily visible in the house itself. During the Civil War, Isaac reportedly continued selling grain to Southern markets, shipping it through Canadian ports. Several of his brothers supported the Union, and the trading activity caused a serious division within the family and its Methodist community.

Pultneyville was known for its connections to the Underground Railroad. The village was part of a region where abolitionism had deep roots. The reported grain trade placed Isaac in an uncomfortable position within a community whose religious and political commitments were increasingly shaped by the war.

The surviving accounts leave many questions unanswered, particularly about Isaac's motives. They also offer a glimpse into the complicated relationship between local prosperity and the larger events unfolding beyond Wayne County.

William E. and Elizabeth Waters Shipley arrived in Pultneyville with five children. Four more were born in New York, including Isaac, the youngest of the nine surviving children, in 1826. Family accounts suggest that the Shipleys came with considerable means, although the records do not fully explain the source of their wealth or the reasons for their departure from England.

Western New York was being promoted in Britain as a place where land could be purchased and agricultural fortunes made. Investors associated with the Pulteney Association had acquired extensive tracts in the region, and the Genesee Country attracted settlers seeking opportunities unavailable to them at home.

Pultneyville offered more than farmland. Its harbor opened onto Lake Ontario, while the Erie Canal, completed in 1825, connected western New York to the Hudson River and New York City. Farmers could grow wheat and other crops, send them toward markets beyond the region, and use the proceeds to expand their holdings.

William purchased land for his sons, and the family's presence grew around Pultneyville and Sodus. By the time Isaac built his house, the Shipleys had become established landowners in a region whose agricultural economy depended increasingly on transportation and trade.

The mansion was a visible expression of that success. Local accounts say its bricks were brought across Lake Ontario from Canada. The grounds included barns, servants' quarters, and an iron fence, and peacocks were remembered among the property's features. It was a substantial residence for a farming community, built by a young man whose family had made a place for itself in a new country.

Isaac's father died in 1859 and his mother in 1863, the year Isaac married Huldah Sherburne. He had spent nearly his entire life in Pultneyville. The landscape, the family farm, and the local Methodist community were familiar parts of his world.

That world was changing rapidly. During Isaac's youth, the United States expanded westward, and the question of whether slavery would extend into newly acquired territories became one of the country's defining political conflicts. The Mexican-American War ended in 1848 with the transfer of an enormous amount of territory to the United States, intensifying the dispute over slavery's future.

Closer to home, western and central New York had become centers of religious revival and reform. Abolition, temperance, and women's rights shaped public life. The 1848 women's rights convention in nearby Seneca Falls brought national attention to the region's reform movements.

The Shipley family belonged to the local Methodist community. When the Pultneyville Methodist Episcopal Church was incorporated in June 1850, Isaac's older brothers Waters and James were among its original trustees, and their father signed as an official witness. The northern Methodist tradition had a strong abolitionist presence, and Pultneyville developed its own association with the Underground Railroad.

When the Civil War began in 1861, Isaac was an established farmer with land, a substantial home, and commercial relationships that had helped sustain his family's prosperity. According to local historical accounts, he continued selling grain to Southern markets through Canadian ports. A New York State historic-preservation review also records that his brothers knew of the trading and that it contributed to a family rift.

The details of the transactions are difficult to reconstruct. The available accounts do not provide a complete record of the shipments, identify every buyer, or establish precisely what happened to the grain after it reached Canada. They do, however, place Isaac's commercial activity within a broader wartime economy in which goods continued to move through intermediaries and across political boundaries.

Canada's proximity made it an important part of the commercial geography of Lake Ontario. The lake had long connected Pultneyville to places beyond the American shore. During the war, those same connections could provide routes to markets that had become politically contentious.

The trade raises an obvious question: what did Isaac believe he was doing?

The records do not establish that he was a Confederate sympathizer or that he publicly opposed the Union. They do not identify him as a member of the Northern antiwar movement, either. Selling grain to Southern markets does not, on its own, establish a person's political convictions, though it does raise questions about the consequences of doing business with a society fighting to preserve slavery.

Isaac may have regarded the grain primarily as a product of his farm and the sale as an ordinary commercial transaction. He may have understood the controversy and proceeded anyway. Without a letter, diary, or other direct account of his reasoning, neither explanation can be confirmed.

What is clearer is the effect the trade had on his relationships. Several of his nephews served in the Union Army, while his brothers supported the Union. Local histories describe Isaac as becoming estranged from his congregation. The disagreement appears to have been serious enough to leave a lasting mark on the family's history.

This was not a dispute between people separated by geography or social class. They shared a family name, a community, and a religious tradition. The war brought their differences into the open, exposing a conflict between the commercial relationships that had helped establish the family and the loyalties that increasingly defined the community around it.

Pultneyville's place in the Underground Railroad makes the history especially difficult to separate from its surroundings. The lake offered a route north for people escaping slavery, while grain reportedly moved through Canadian ports toward Southern markets. These were different movements with different purposes, yet they depended on the same waterways and the same geography.

The contrast does not tell us everything about Isaac. It does tell us something about the place in which he lived. A community's history is rarely as consistent as its public reputation. People can share a church and a village without agreeing on what their obligations require, particularly when the consequences of those disagreements extend beyond the household.

Isaac's life continued long after the war. The farm required attention, the house needed maintenance, and his children were growing up. On December 4, 1880, Isaac and Huldah were visiting friends in Rochester when a fire broke out at the mansion.

Their children, Archer, fifteen, and Jean, thirteen, were home. According to local accounts, Archer discovered the fire while going downstairs to tend the coal furnace. He got Jean outside, went to the barn, mounted a horse, and rode approximately three-quarters of a mile into Pultneyville to wake the Methodist church sexton.

The church bell sounded, and the children survived. The mansion remained standing, although the fire caused extensive damage and destroyed other buildings and farm equipment.

By then, the agricultural economy that had supported the Shipleys was changing. Railroads increasingly determined how goods moved through the region, and major lines served nearby communities such as Williamson and Sodus rather than running directly through Pultneyville. The lake remained a presence in village life, but its role in moving agricultural products was no longer what it had been.

In 1885, Isaac still owned approximately 265 acres, but the property carried a mortgage of $6,500. He died in 1892, and the land was eventually foreclosed. Frederick Teats acquired the property in 1896 and began developing it for peach growing.

The farm continued under new ownership. The family that had built its life there was gone.

Huldah and Jean eventually moved to Rochester, while Archer established a life elsewhere. In 1909, two months after Huldah's death, Jean married George Baldwin Selden, the Rochester inventor associated with an early gasoline-powered automobile patent. The Shipleys had arrived in western New York when canals, harbors, and agricultural land were opening new opportunities. By the time Jean married Selden, the automobile was beginning to reshape the possibilities of transportation.

The house remains a physical record of the family's prosperity, but it cannot tell the whole story. The surviving documents preserve the acreage, the mortgage, the church connections, the fire, and the broad outline of Isaac's wartime trade. They provide much less access to the conversations that took place between brothers or the explanations Isaac may have offered to his neighbors.

That gap matters. It is tempting to give historical figures a clear motive and a fixed place in the story, particularly when their actions touch questions that remain morally charged. Isaac's reported grain trade invites judgment, but the surviving evidence does not supply a complete account of his political beliefs or private reasoning.

What it does preserve is a family whose fortunes were tied to land and commerce, whose religious life connected it to a community with abolitionist roots, and whose relationships were strained by the Civil War. Those facts are enough to make the story worth telling without pretending that every question can be resolved.

From the mansion, it is possible to understand why the Shipleys came to Pultneyville. There was land to cultivate, a harbor nearby, and access to markets beyond the lake. The family built a home and accumulated property in a place that offered a different future from the one they had left behind.

But the same connections that helped create their prosperity carried them into a larger world of competing interests and loyalties. Isaac's story is part of that history, as are the disagreements that divided his family and the economic changes that eventually took the property from them.

The house has outlasted the people who built it. Its walls remain, while the circumstances that gave rise to it have changed beyond recognition. The lake still lies beyond the village, linking the place to the wider world as it did in Isaac's lifetime.

The mansion can be admired for its craftsmanship and its survival. Its history asks something more of us: to look beyond the appearance of permanence and consider the lives, decisions, and disagreements that took place within it.