Introduction

In December of 2012 my mother and her partner bought a summer home in Bennington, Vermont. After much deliberation they settled on a modest one-and-a-half story Cape duplex in the center of the historic district of Old Bennington. The house was bright inside -- with buttery, wide plank pine floors and a traditional Rumford fireplace with a beehive bake oven to one side. A hand-painted plaque in the garage said, intriguingly, “Hiram Waters’ Carpenter Shop, c. 1820.” Curious to find out more of the history of the house, I set out to learn who had built it, when it was built, and who had lived there during its nearly two-hundred-year history.

In researching local sources I came across the remarkable Hiram Harwood diaries, written between 1805 and 1837 in the library collections of the Bennington Museum. In no time I discovered that Hiram Waters was a brother-in-law of Hiram Harwood, which made the diaries specially informative. It is rare to find a historical source that covers such a long period of time in detail. Robert Shalhope’s A Tale of New England provided a stepping stone into these diaries of a farmer in early Bennington, but I wanted to read the originals.

What interested me in Harwood’s diaries was the story of Hiram Waters. Buried in this farmer’s daily ruminations on the weather and the milking of cows is the story of two families, Harwoods and Waters, who lived in close proximity in the Tanbrook neighborhood, a couple of miles south of Old Bennington on today’s Monument Avenue. The diaries record their friendships, commercial transactions, marriages, and
deaths. Most early references are to Hiram Waters’s father and siblings, who periodically performed carpentry and manual labor around the Harwoods’ farm. Over time, the bond between families shifted to Hiram Waters, youngest male of the Waters clan, who married Harwood’s younger sister, Diadamia.

Harwood mentioned many of his brother-in-law’s professional activities as a builder in addition to giving us a remarkably intimate view of his life. True to the period, the diaries convey little in the way of emotion on the part of the writer, but there are descriptive passages that offer a virtual window onto the past, full of evocative details. Most references in this essay are taken from the Harwood diaries (dates are shown in parentheses), corroborated by land and census records. Other resources from the period have been consulted.

Hiram Waters -- Young Rascal

By all accounts, Hiram Waters was a light hearted and agreeable fellow. “Uncle Hi,” as he was known, had a reputation as a master builder in Bennington County as well as in Washington County, New York. Near neighbor John Van der Speigel Merrill (b. 1844) grew up in a house around the corner from the Waters. Remembering his childhood in the 1840s and ’50s, he wrote, “How delighted we were if we could visit him [in his carpenter’s shop] and watch him as he worked. Fresh and sweet was the odor of the long curly shavings that fell to the floor and later found their way into our basket. How interested we were in the stories he would tell us, for ‘Uncle Hiram’ was very amusing in a way peculiar to himself. Children instinctively gathered around him. He was fond of them and they seemed to know it. He was never harsh or impatient, but on the contrary was gentle and cheerful.” (Henry Clay Day Papers, A 62, Bennington Museum.)

In 1881, Henry Clay Day, a Bennington merchant and collector of memorabilia, interviewed Waters as one of the oldest members of the community. Waters, then 88, told stories of his younger years, revealing a keen and devilish sense of humor. “Uncle Hi” told how he played a prank on Luther Bliss, then 70, by painting his “very fine pig, white . . . about 50 pounds” black with a white stripe on its face. Bliss went out to feed his animals the next morning and was “astonished to behold a black pig.” Bliss swore someone had stolen his pretty white pig until neighbors let him in on the secret. Waters claimed it took two full days of scrubbing before that pig was white again and by then, Bliss’s face was the one that was black!

Another tale involved Hiram and building partner Dave Ruttenbur.
The two were repairing the chimney of a house in Arlington when Ruttenbur suggested going out on the roof to rest, as the weather was excessively hot. While there, they heard the subdued conversation of two lovers below. Ruttenbur suggested that Hiram wriggle down the chimney to hear what the lovers were saying. As Hiram slowly descended the chimney, pieces of soot fell into smouldering embers below. The lovers remarked that there must be “a coming rain.” On his way back up, Hiram had nearly emerged when he put his hand on a loose brick at the top that gave way and tumbled into the fire below. The man visiting his beloved “supposing the devil had made his appearance dashed thro’ a window and it is said the sound of the horses hoofs could be heard for 15 minutes. Hiram broke his left wrist and was badly hurt.”

Variants of these stories are retold in Richard S. Bayhan’s “Humorous Tales of Bennington-on-the-Hill,” published in 1918 (available online at openlibrary.org). The diaries of Hiram Harwood also corroborate the notion that Hiram Waters was a high-spirited youth, repeatedly calling him “lively,” and describing evenings when Waters danced and played music.

Harwood, who rarely commented on matters of fashion, confirmed Waters’s flamboyant sense of style, noting in May of 1824, Waters “... arrived late in the day, with a pair of monstrously wide trousers on – light colored.” Later that year, on December 1, 1824, he was noted wearing a little round hat. And on November, 1, 1829, in the years he was courting Diadamia, Harwood writes: “In the evening H. Waters wore his best suit – had on a very superb ruffle shirt.” In spite of his outlandish clothing
and youthful indiscretions, Hiram Waters grew up to be an upstanding and respected member of the Bennington community for most of the nineteenth century.

The Waters Family, a Brady Bunch

Hiram Waters was born in 1797, the youngest child in a blended family of twelve children. His father, Captain Oliver Waters, came from a large family in Hoosick, New York, the second of four sons and two daughters born to Adam and Mary Waters. After Oliver’s first wife, Theoda, died in 1784, leaving him with four children, he married Phebe Beebe Judd, a widow who also had previous offspring, and they produced four more children together. They were in Halifax, Vermont, and moved to Bennington sometime between 1784 and 1790. In 1798, Oliver purchased nine acres of land in Bennington from Levi Hathaway for $75 and immediately mortgaged the property to Isaac Judd, one of his older step-sons. He sold the property six years later, in 1804. So it seems that resources were scarce.

The first of Oliver and Phebe’s older boys, Oliver Junior, went west to Columbus, Ohio. A second son, Nathaniel, married Mary (Polly) Dewey of Bennington, then disappeared from historical sources between 1804 and 1811. Next were Adam and his younger brother Elisha, who worked together doing carpentry and joinery in Bennington. Adam was the older of the two but had bad luck in business. In January 1808 the brothers jointly purchased property in Bennington between Captain Elijah Dewey and Moses Robinson. Adam sold to his brother in a quitclaim on March 7, 1810, describing the property as “at the east corner of the shop now occupied by Adam Waters.” This seems to indicate that they had a carpentry or joiner’s shop in this center town location, according to town records. Two weeks later Adam was forced to flee to Swanton, Vermont, to escape creditors and died there a few months later. (3/20/10 and 11/24/10)

Elisha, the third son, continued to work at carpentry after his brother’s misfortunes and purchased various properties in Old Bennington over many years. In 1805, the same year the Old First Church was built, he built a large and handsome 2½-story federal style home located south on what is now Monument Avenue. This home was later moved to the top of Elm Street around 1930.

The Waters and Harwoods, Near Neighbors

Elisha Waters was a friend and near neighbor of Hiram Harwood in the Tanbrook neighborhood. As such, the two families socialized
with one another, and Elisha Waters often worked on carpentry projects for Harwood. He did tasks such as: worked on Harwood's barn and whitewashed in the house (5/29/09); made doors for the horse stable (11/20/09); mended the plow (4/23/10); drew stones for the cellar wall (5/3/10); moved Harwood's barn (12/11/10); started an addition to the barn (5/27/11); had his man Ruttenbur take down a partition in the house (11/7/14). Elisha sometimes sent his younger brother Hiram, who worked for him during the middle 1810s. Elisha built and repaired parts of Harwood's home and barns as well as other properties. He was well respected by Harwood, who characterized him as “... a quick workman . . . guided by judgment in his plans. – His price is a dollar a day if not paid in cash . . .” And he gave a discount of one shilling if paid in cash. (12/7/08)

Elisha is described as the “master workman” at the Hinman raising in May of 1810 (5/29/10), working on the Clarks' house (4/29/15), building his shop on Captain Moses Robinson's land (4/3/17), and framing a barn for John Van Der Spiegel (7/21/17). Elisha raised a “respectable two story house” at Van Der Spiegel's on May 14, 1822, while the boys played in the meadow behind the house. Elisha was also involved in the making of furniture. Harwood wrote, “My father bargained with Elisha Waters this evening for a bureau.” (3/15/16)

Elisha's half-brother, Hiram, was thirteen years his junior and worked for him as an apprentice at the same time as his good friend Dave Ruttenbur. Like the other young “hands,” Hiram probably lived with Elisha. But in 1816, at the age of around 20, Hiram Waters “abruptly quitted” his brother Elisha. (1/22/16) Two months later in March his colleague Dave Ruttenbur then also “eloped” from Elisha to his father's. (3/15/16)

Elisha may have been a difficult taskmaster. His own father, Captain Oliver Waters, secured a “peace warrant” against him in February 1821. (2/17/21) Then in October 1827 Harwood wrote, “There was considerable difficulty between Capt. W. and his two apprentices Ben Sears and Hen. Robinson, who as they alleged, by mutual consent had quitted his service.” Sears and Robinson left Elisha to work for the younger Hiram Waters, who after leaving the employ of his brother had gone out on his own as a carpenter-joiner.

In December 1829 Harwood wrote an entry that recounted a conflict with Elisha over unpaid accounts from two years previous. Elisha claimed poverty and couldn’t pay the sum. In the spring of 1831, after the tragic death of Elisha's fifth daughter Sophia, age 10, he sold his house and orchard to Samuel H. Brown for $1,000 and moved his family to Troy. (4/17/31)
Hiram Waters – Bachelor and Builder, 1820-1830

After leaving his brother’s service, Hiram Waters established himself as a builder on his own. He also became close to the Harwood clan, spending many evenings at the farm playing music with Hiram Harwood and eventually courting Harwood’s sister Diadamia. Harwood’s diaries record many of Hiram Waters’s projects in and around Bennington. Some of these include: an “important job” for J.H. Hicks, who had recently become owner of Elijah Dewey’s tavern (later known as the Walloomsac Inn) and a barnraising for Dr. Swift on May 27, 1820.

When he was 24, Waters left his tools with Hiram Harwood and walked one hundred fifty miles to Boston with his apprentice, Holland Blackmer. (3/20/22) He evidently stayed in Boston for ten months, returning in January 1823. (1/17/23) Blackmer relocated in Boston, becoming an established “housewright,” according to the Boston City Directory of 1831. The Day Papers reported that, “Mr. Blackmer became one of the most skillful stair builders in Boston, accumulated a handsome property and died leaving several children.”

Hiram Waters returned to Bennington where he and Dave Ruttenbur worked on the Blackmers’ family house on February 12, 1824, and by the end of that year, Waters had established a shop of his own. Harwood writes that he “Called at Dr. Swift’s old office, now occupied by H. Waters as a joiner’s shop.” (12/18/24) Soon thereafter Hiram Harwood recounts that he “walked with H. Waters who carried in his arms a number of new augur handles that his friend Hyde had turned for him as he was returning to Dexter’s, his place of abode.” (1/1/25)

In October 1825, Seth Hunt, prominent businessman and proprietor of the Old Furnace, decided to establish a large saltworks near Mobile, Alabama. “Hiram Waters, Esq., of Bennington Center, had charge of the erection of these works and took with him from Bennington to Alabama quite a list of our citizen carpenters and mechanics to assist in erecting the buildings required by Mr. Hunt,” it was reported in the weekly Bennington Banner. Harwood confirms: “Hiram Waters, Norman Edgerton, Charles Thatcher . . . with others left town early this morning for the saltworks in Alabama under a contract with Gov. Seth Hunt for six months service.” (10/8/25) While in Alabama, Waters sent a letter back to Harwood “penned by Norman Edgerton.” (3/25/26) Over the years, Harwood mentions frequently that he wrote and kept accounts for Waters. This, in conjunction with the mention that Norman Edgerton “penned” a letter for him suggests that Hiram Waters may have been able to read but relied on Harwood to write letters and contracts, and keep his bills.
Returning from Alabama in July 1826, Hiram Waters re-established his carpentry and joinery business, and seems to have been successful. On May 10, 1827, he purchased his first lot of land, in the center of Old Bennington, from Dr. Heman Swift in two separate parcels for $100. He immediately took out a mortgage for $1,000 from Edward H. Swift, the doctor’s nephew. This appears to have been the financial mechanism that allowed the construction of his new home and adjacent joiner’s shop.

In 1829 Waters was working on the schoolhouse windows. Harwood wrote: “I dined with H. then taking glass, putty, nails and clapboards drove to the schoolhouse where the sashes were taken out and all vacancies filled, tinned and puttied in by H.W. amounting to 21 panes . . . .” (11/1/29) In late November 1829 Waters was moving in at the Harwoods’ farm, but still working out of his shop in town. He had been boarding at Dexter’s, but now there was “great expectation of sleeping in his new bed which was now about finished by our ladies.” (11/29/29) Several days later, Harwood wrote, “walked with H. Waters to his shop where a short time was spent in looking at his buildings, writing a little, &c. . . .” It would appear that although Waters’s shop was done, the house was not finished and while it was being completed he boarded at Harwood’s farm.

Waters had a job at Norman Norton’s in early January 1830 (1/4/30) and in February Harwood noted, “For H. Waters wrote a billet to David Wilcox to inform him upon what terms the former would undertake to build a house for the latter. . . .” A week later, “H. Waters & B. Sears came down and dictated a Bill of Materials for the construction of a house for David Wilcox, Hoosick Four Corners, NY, which I drew for them.” (2/15/30) Waters was concurrently working on the timber part of a brick house for Mr. J. C. Andrews (2/14/30) and built houses for a Mr. Richmond of Hoosick and J. Starin of West Bennington that same year. (6/13/30 and 11/17/30)
Hiram Waters Settles Down – 1830-1834

The beginning of 1831 seems to have been an especially productive time for Hiram Waters. His friend Harwood wrote about his soon-to-be brother-in-law almost daily, and the two families became even closer. On February 1, 1831, Hiram Waters married Harwood’s younger sister Diadamia. The description of the wedding day was full of detail:

The ladies of this house were diligently employed most of the day cooking, cleaning house, cleaning old furniture &c &c. In the eve’g according to previous arrangement, the family having dressed and otherwise duly prepared themselves, Mr. J. Rogers appeared about sunset with older Teesdell whom he introduced to the heads of the family – They were invited into what we commonly term “The North Room”. A short pause ensued when Mr. Bridegroom, H. Waters & Miss Bride, D. Harwood were notified that the priest was ready to receive them and were conducted to the stand by B. Sears and Miss M.A. Waters, who officiated as waiters on the occasion. Mr. T. immediately taking a chair in his hand stepped into the center of the room, and supporting himself on his chair with his face to the north, went on in very handsome style with the ceremony -- pronouncing them at the conclusion “Husband & Wife” – closing with a short and very appropriate Address to the Throne of Grace. The cake and wine were pretty liberally distributed by fr’d S. & his associate of which Mr. T. and friend R. partook. Staid a short time and then departed. The comp’y afterwards tho’ small indulged themselves in kissing & running round the chimney at no moderate rate. On the whole it turned out to be just such a wedding as we wished it to be. Those attending who were not exactly members of the family and whose names have not already been inserted -- were J. Ambrose Wight, G.P. Harwood and S.W. Daniels . . . (2/1/31)

A week later, February 8, Hiram Waters and his new bride “started for Troy in Hicks’ small elegant cutter – drawn by the Indian pony – in fine harness & bells” to purchase furniture for their new house. After the wedding, Hiram and Diadamia continued to live at the Harwood farm until May 5, 1831, when Harwood recorded, “H. Waters, lady and effect were this day removed to the dwelling of s’d Waters, all in prime order – there were two loads choice articles.”

That spring, Waters was involved in several projects. Harwood wrote that he “visited the shop of H. Waters – saw the painter lettering a sign
Say Mr. Fairfield. Wrote some for Waters.” (3/17/31) In April, Waters was working for a mill owner named Walbridge, and again, Harwood wrote “Performed writing for H. Waters.” References to paint indicate that Waters provided a variety of building services in addition to joinery.

By May 1831 Hiram Waters at age 34 was the last male member of his nuclear family left in Bennington. His father Oliver had died ten years before and his older brothers, Adam, Oliver, and Worthy had all passed away. Brother Nathaniel had died before 1811 and brother Elisha, the successful businessman and carpenter, had moved his family to Troy in the spring of 1831. Hiram had a good shop, his own dwelling house, a wife and later in the year, his first child, Lydia Sophie.

After the time of Waters’s marriage to Diadamia Harwood, the two families became one extended family. They saw one another almost daily. After the birth of the Waters’s first child, Harwood’s unmarried sister Lydia lived with Diadamia and Hiram as a nursemaid. Harwood’s daughter Adeline also stayed at the Waters home during months she was in school at the old Academy. And Hiram Harwood, on his daily rounds of the center village selling cheese and keeping accounts, regularly parked his wagon and horses in Waters's barn and walked from shop to shop. Social visits were most frequent in the winter months, somewhat less so during the summer when there was a great amount of work to do on the farm.

Many evenings were spent together, playing music and socializing. This pleasant description of a winter’s evening on December 7, 1832, is particularly full of detail:

In the eve’g went with wife and son to H. Waters’ where a fine visit was had – Cous. Marg’t & Adeline went there early P.M. The company of cous. Emily, Edwin & Amanda Robinson & Miss Eliza Smedley was highly enjoyed. Discoursed with old Mrs. Waters, now 75 years of age, respecting the old Tory Episcopal Clergyman – Peters of Hebron, Conn., who she said she well knew…. Mr. Chapin, the accomplished painter, came in by request with his pipes & entertained the company with very soft, pretty music – never heard such before excepting at Burlington, Vt., 1812, when I had no opportunity to view the inst. H.W. laid aside his tools, sent for a flute on which I performed – but pretty drily – could not recollect my pieces. The likeness of little L.S. [baby Lydia Sophie]Waters playing with a kitten, drawn by Mr. C., was exhibited – much to the pleasure & satisfaction of the comp’y. By invitation walked over to Mr. C.’s, formerly I. Hendryx Tailor Shop & viewed portraits of upwards of 20 persons – among whom were those of S.C. Raymond,
wife, son & daughter, Gov. Tichenor, large as life, in gilt frame –
eminently majestic & exact. W.S. Southworth, Sam'l S. Scott, S.
Nicholls & lady, &c. Saw the rough of a grand Scriptural Piece –
the taking down of the dead body of our Saviour from the cross by
Joseph of Arimathea & others – A labor of many months and days to
the artist. Late in the evening all hands returned home – extremely
rough waggon'ng . . .

The painter, Alpheus Chapin, and his wife were renting the house next
door to the Waters. In January 1832 there was a “terrible E blow attended
with snow, hail and rain” and “Hiram Waters’ sign was blown off with part
of the chimney against which it was placed.” (1/30/32) One can envision
Waters’s successful carpentry shop with its sign up on the roof, and the
dwelling house attached at the left.

**The House and Shop Burn**

All was going well when two weeks after the birth of the Waters’s
second child, in the raw month of March 1834, a terrible fire completely
destroyed Hiram Waters’s shop and seriously damaged his house. After
this devastating event, 175 men from Bennington contributed sums from
50 cents to $50 to a fund to help him rebuild. They collected a total of
$878 to help the Waters family offset the extensive damage to the structure,
contents, and tools inside. The best description of the fire and its causes is
given in a hand-written subscription book, transcribed by Harwood, now in
the collection of the Bennington Museum:

. . . Hiram Waters of Bennington … suffered a very heavy loss by
fire on the morning of March 27, 1834, between the hours of 6 &
9 O’Clock a.m. in the destruction of a fine 3 story building & the
rear part of his dwelling, but recently & very conveniently fitted up
& occupied as a kitchen with other apartments: nothing escaping
but the low front containing but a single spacious room which
though affording no very inconsiderable accommodation, was but
a sorry remnant of the valuable property thus destroyed. The first
mentioned building – 2d & 3r stories were occupied as a joiner’s
shop & at the time of the fire contained an unusual supply of tools of
every description suited to the wants of the carpenter & joiner – also
many panel doors, window sashes &c&c – purposely finished for the
large new house he was then engaged in erecting at Arlington, for J.B.
Lathrop – Innkeeper. Every exertion was made for the suppression
of the flames by the good people of all ages & sexes assembled from all parts of the town, & so far successful as to prevent their spreading over the village, by means of an excellent engine which was very skillfully managed. All the household furniture, bedding, wearing apparel &c with trifling exceptions were saved almost without injury. His loss was, to one in his circumstance very great, but never could be accurately known – was however estimated in round numbers at $3000 – This accident happened by a spark, as was supposed, or, small coal of fire taking among shavings in the 2d story of the shop escaping from a boxstove while the hands were at breakfast – No one ever knew how the fire did take for the whole apartment was in a blaze at the first alarm. We the undersigned hereby obligate ourselves to pay to Hiram Waters in consideration of the loss this day sustained by him, by the burning of his house, shop &c, the sums affixed to our names respectively. Bennington, March 27, 1834.

It is clear from these descriptions of the fire that the shop was “joined up to his dwelling” and “the kitchen which had been erected about 18 months since at great expense, was also destroyed, but the principal part of his front building was saved, roof greatly damaged, leaving it in so ruinous a condition as to render it almost unfit for repairs.”

Waters had worked on this new kitchen addition in the summer of 1832, and in October of that year did some work for Dr. Heman Swift “for which rec’d in paym’t an elegant Franklin stove, &c.” (10/11/32) Before the fire, Waters had many men working for him and his average annual income was estimated at $1,700; by comparison to Harwood, the dairy farmer, whose income was around $900 the previous year. Waters not only did building projects, but also had a 60-acre woodlot and an interest in a herd of cattle. His projects ranged from building houses, to work on the school buildings in town (the Bennington Academy and the Seminary) and building mills and factories for community leaders Walbridge, Hinsdill, and Doolittle. His biggest project in 1834 was building a mansion for innkeeper J.B. Lathrop in Arlington.

Rebuilding the House: 1834-1836

After the fire, Hiram and Diadamia Waters moved back to the Harwood farm with a toddler, newborn infant, nurse, maid, and three hired men and remained there throughout the summer of 1834. (3/28/34) Waters must have burned his coat while attempting to extinguish the flames, for even though he had lost everything he owned, he immediately
ordered another to be made by a local seamstress, Betsey Street. (4/3/34)

It was eight months before the family could move into their own house, but Waters immediately got back to work. Within days of the fire, he left for New York City to purchase new tools to replace those lost in the burned shop. (4/9/34) During that summer, Diadamia and the children stayed with the Harwoods while Hiram Waters went back and forth between Arlington and Bennington, working on his job for Lathrop. He spent the weeknights at the job site, and came back to Bennington on either Saturday or Sunday each week. By the end of the summer, he was also thinking of working on his own house – in July and August he ordered lumber from Lyon’s mill in Woodford. (7/14/34 and 8/4/34)

The family briefly visited Hiram’s mother in Warrensburg, New York, on October 15, then Hiram returned to start working on the cellar and well of his own house. “H. Waters appeared to be highly pleased in forwarding his cellar and well digging . . .” (10/22/34) The next day Harwood stopped by and noted “… made another halt at the ruins of H. Waters – team employed in scraping out cellar – well sunk, say 9 feet to water – lumber & timber on hand and more coming on . . .” (10/23/34) The Waters were still living at the Harwood’s during this time. Harwood wrote “H. Waters came home in fine spirits – everything moving about right – teams bringing in stone from old walls given him by Dr. H. Swift, for filling up trenches, stoning well, &c, &c.”

Finally in mid-October the house was in a livable condition, though the shop was not yet reconstructed. “H. Waters having come down with Isaac Allen & team to get a load of household goods, …– Soon after drove off with his load in triumph.” By October 13 Hiram, Diadamia, and the two babies had moved in, with Aunt Lydia in tow to help with the children. Waters was back at work in the “service of Dea’c Hinsdill” by early December, (12/6/34) and on the ninth of that month, Harwood notes that “H. Waters hands were employed at house framing.”

Although the Waters home was quite full of people, Harwood’s daughter Adeline was also preparing to move up to live with them in town for the academic term. “Adeline packed her things, books inclusive, for H. Waters’ intending there to reside while attending school the present term.” (12/10/34.) Harwood stopped the next day to check on her and wrote “on being invited to sup made some sport for my sister & daughter by refusing the offer under the plea of disliking her cooking . . .” (12/11/34/)

After the move, the extended family fell back into a regular routine of visiting back and forth between the Harwood farm and the Waters house. Harwood commented every few days about where Waters was and what he was doing. Waters’s house in town continued to be the stopping
place where Harwood stabled his horses and walked from store to store conducting daily business rounds. He could also check in on his daughter Adeline on a regular basis and often took a meal with her there. More than once, Harwood called the Waters home the family’s “headquarters” for Sunday worship. (12/28/34)

With his shop still in ruins, Waters apparently rented another space a few doors up the street. Several references are made to this temporary relocation of the business next to Dr. Heman Swift’s property. On his daily rounds Harwood notes: “Made the first call at H. Waters’ all right there & at his shop – late Canfield’s law office – in Dr. M.[H] Swift’s old store building – formerly occupied by capt. Moses Robinson as a store, but since his time altered a good deal in being hoisted another story & c.” (2/14/35) Ten days later, “Arrived in the Street & rested, and talked with H. Waters at his new shop near Dr. H. Swift’s – G. Robinson was with him making sashes.” (2/24/35) Yet another description of this temporary shop was: “Visited the shop of H. Waters – Dr. H. Swift’s old store – where saw a new lot of bitt. stock & all the fine things thereunto belonging – tools so tempered as to appear as if made of brass – Geo, Robinson & Russell Judd were at work there.” It would appear that Waters may have sold or displayed fine tools in the shop in addition to performing carpentry work.

An entertaining tale recounted in Richard Bayhan’s book “Humourous Tales of Bennington-on-the-Hill” involved a description of Hiram Waters’s extensive tools. On April Fool’s Day, Waters hoisted a white calf in the belfry of the First Church -- “In the morning the calf was still there and singing sweetly, and as Uncle Hi was the only carpenter in town, and possessed the only apparatus for hoisting or lowering articles, the neighbors were finally compelled to pay him $10 to take the animal down.” Waters was not the only carpenter but may have been the only one with the rigging to perform these kinds of tasks.

In late 1834 and early 1835, Waters’s biggest client seems to have been Deacon Stephen Hinsdill, considered to be the wealthiest man in Bennington based on earnings from his cotton mills along Paran Creek. He founded the Bennington Seminary with his son-in-law James Ballard, and built the New Stone Church in the neighborhood of the mills, known as Hinsdillville. Waters’s relationship with Hinsdill had gone back to at least 1831 when he did a large project for him costing $500 (1/15/32) -- a price comparable to building a house. He and Benjamin Sears then built the Hinsdill store for the deacon’s nephew and business partner in 1832, (4/5/32) and Waters built a 36-foot addition to the boarding house of Hinsdill’s Seminary in 1833. (6/19/33) The winter of 1835 included projects such as working on a new bridge: “Deacon Hinsdill was so
bejuggled about his bridge concern as to send a man to H. Waters post haste to come down to assist in raising it – extremity of weather – ice & every other obstacle to the contrary notwithstanding.” Ben Sears was also involved in this bridge project. (2/27/35 and 2/28/35)

Waters worked on his own house in between other jobs – a year after the fire in March our diarist notes that “Hiram and hands snugly employed in framing his new house – shortly to be raised” (3/26/35), but the raising wasn’t actually accomplished until nearly two months later at the end of May. Harwood’s farmhand George was busy picking up stones in the southwest meadow on May 22 but the “. . . business was left unfinished to go to the raising of H. Water’s house . . .” (5/22/35) At the same time, Waters was building a “fine house” around the corner for the Hon. Hiland Hall, “attached to his former dwelling.” (5/29/35) Soon thereafter he was at work raising the frame of a new blacksmith shop for Samuel Chandler. (6/6/35) In June Waters was back at Hiland Hall’s property when Harwood wrote, “Father being at H. Hall’s where H.W. was at work repairing house – the latter slipped into the wagon the sash of the circular gable end window to be conveyed to his shop. . .” (6/18/35) Waters and Ben Sears were repairing the dam and flume for Hinsdill in November. (9/28/35) Then Waters injured himself while “assisting at the removal of the old David merchant store lately occupied by J. Hicks, Esq. as a saddle shop . . . B.R. Sears removed it on his own premises, being the lawful possessor of the same.” (12/19/35)

In December, Harwood wrote accounts for his brother-in-law -- “that against S. Hinsdill being $745.40! Another against Jo. Ogden – Dr. & Cr. And a third against Hiram Blackmer – Tot’l $990.” (12/25/35) By the beginning of the New Year there were rumors that Hinsdill, clearly one of Waters's most important clients, was financially insolvent: “Deac. S. Hinsdill . . . was rather indignant at the recent report of his failure. On ground lately purchased of Ed’w M. Welling, having the county surveyor J.N. Hindsill with him, plotted for a store at N. Bennington of large dimensions which he contemplated building with all possible dispatch. H.W. [Hiram Waters] assisted at surveying said ground.”

In March 1836, Harwood was up at Waters’s house in town. They settled accounts then they “Dined – pres’t Hiram, wife & children, D. Ruttenbur, J. Godby, Geo. Robinson & black Charley –… H. got Chandler’s horse & cutter to go to Deac. Hinsdill’s – I accepted an invitation to go with him. D. Ruttenbur rode up to L.P. & Co. [Lyman Patchin’s?] with an elegant fan light window lately made at H.’s. Saw him put it in its place W. gable front of new brick store – making a very appropriate appearance . . . Waters having walked up the hill thus far with
B.R. Sears – seated himself by my side, and proceeding down Court House hill, by Montague’s and New Road – Soon arrived at H.’s [Hinsdill’s] where the first compliment was that Deacon wanted H. [Hiram] to undertake a small job at finishing or some way fashioning inside of meeting house. It was readily taken.” (3/1/36) This reference to Hinsdill’s meetinghouse refers to the inside of the new [Presbyterian] Stone Church built by Hinsdill for the paper mill community.

Notes on the business of building

Various references in Harwood’s writings demonstrate that Waters raised houses, built bridges, finished interiors, painted rugs, floors and signs, and made various repairs on existing structures. He may have had a specialty in building sashes, fine windows and panel doors, built in his shop then moved to on-site locations. Big jobs started at the woodlot, selecting trees to be used, taking lumber to a mill and then delivering materials to the job.

Waters had a continuing interest in current trends in architecture. In October 1826 he asked Harwood, who was going to Troy, to pick up a copy of Asher Benjamin’s “latest edition” for him. Waters most likely meant Asher Benjamin’s popular guide The American Builder’s Companion, which was in its fifth edition in 1826, but he actually referred to it as “Benjamin’s Architecture.” This clearly indicated that he had previous knowledge of Benjamin’s guides and knew that there was a recent edition. In fact, the fireplace design in the front ell of Waters’s home is taken directly from Benjamin’s 1833 book The Practice of Architecture.

Altogether, between 1831 and 1837 Harwood mentions more than twenty men who helped Waters with various building tasks. Some were probably short-term day laborers who worked on the heaviest jobs, like hauling wood from the woodlot. He also employed both apprentice-level “hands” and independent “journeymen” carpenters. The younger hands probably worked under contracts for a specified length of time or indenture, and the more experienced may have worked on shorter contracts. Some of Waters’s apprentices were from the oldest Bennington families, including the Fays and Robinsons. Waters dismissed one apprentice named W. Ault for improper conduct (4/19/34) and ended up in a lawsuit with another, George Robinson, over missed days of work. (2/17/37)

A few men stand out as frequent working partners with Waters. In particular, Dave Ruttenbur and Holland Blackmer appear often in the years soon after his split with Elisha. Later, Benjamin R. Sears became Waters’s usual building partner, and Harwood wrote several contracts for the two...
together to perform work for local clients. Benjamin Sears and Hiram Waters were obviously close, but it is unclear whether Sears worked at a journeyman level for Waters, or as equal partners, or if they simply worked independently and collaborated on jobs. Waters was almost ten years older than Sears, but they were also personal friends – Sears married Waters’s niece Mary Ann Waters, and Benjamin and Mary Ann were the only attendants at Hiram Waters’s wedding to Diadamia. Sears and Waters worked together, socialized together, and raised their children as neighbors during the same years in the center of Old Bennington.

Like busy contractors today, Waters often had to juggle more than one project at a time. When he was supervising the lumbering of his woodlot in Bennington, he had to send a man with directions to his hand Samuel Fay, working on a project in Arlington. (11/22/33) And when he contracted to make a new factory for Isaac Doolittle, he hired Elijah Atkins to do the roofing and set the windows in the 80-foot building. Harwood mentions, “H. felt very well respecting it & resolved to get the whole building jobbed off in like manner.” (3/14/32)

In some cases, Waters had to compete for work. March 3, 1836, he received a letter from Garrett Van Hoosen inviting him to bid on a new building for the Mapletown Liberal Religious Society, an abolitionist church in Hoosick. Van Hoosen wanted him to meet with a committee about the details. Waters was ambivalent about working by committee, and was ultimately underbid by Edward Welling of North Bennington. (3/3/36 and 3/12/36)

Recession, 1836-1837

At the end of April 1836, two full years after the fire, Harwood writes: “Hiram Waters’ new house nearly finished.” (4/28/36) In May, the “hands were] very industriously finishing new house.” At the end of the month, Harwood’s farmhand George went to the “raising of Hiram Waters’ shop.” (5/21/36 and 5/23/36)

That June, Harwood was at Waters’s house in town writing accounts. “Having finished writing – he [Waters] took me all over his new house & cellar to let me see how convenient & well furnished it was. Cellar faithfully flagged – walls smoothly finished in good durable style – in NW quarter of which stood a capacious reservoir built of bricks closely cemented -- furnished with copper pump &c – to contain a large supply of rain water – at present however —so cracked could not contain any – must be repaired.” (6/11/36)

The year was busy for Hiram Waters. Summer found him building a boarding house near Hinsdill’s mill with Sam Judd Junior. (8/26/36). In
August, another of Waters's men, Mr. Shaw, was seriously ill and needed a relative to come and take care of him. (8/27/36) The end of 1836 also brought a third child to the Waters household on Christmas day. In February of 1837, rumors of Stephen Hinsdill's insolvency were confirmed. Harwood reports that his neighbor Mr. Root “informed me of the Failure of Deac. S. Hinsdill which was announced last evening! Subsequently learned that the amount for which he was supposed to have failed was about $130,000!!! It was an event that was looked for by many as inevitable….” But liquidation of debts were given priority by the court so Waters was protected from Hinsdill’s losses.

Harwood’s diaries in the spring and summer of 1837 reflected the national economic decline. On a June visit to Elisha Waters in Troy, Harwood heard that there was much “stagnation in business of all kinds. Poor people in great distress for want of employment.” Hiram Waters owed Harwood $100 from a loan in the fall of 1836, and in June Harwood wrote: “Rec’d call from H. Waters -- Some complaint of hard times & bad debts – all however met manfully – very little grumbling.”

Although Hinsdill’s businesses had failed, Waters still found work, this time on the Truman Estes factory on Paran Creek in North Bennington: “Called to view Estes Factory – walls of which were finished – commenced plastering [plastering] interior. Hiram Waters & hands employed on steeple – perhaps had but one with him – very generously shewed father & me all over. Well guarded against fire. Went up on deck of steeple – hand engaged in painting outside that thing in imitation of stone wo’k where it rises from roof. Rec’d from hand of s’d Hiram twenty five dollars to be endorsed on $100 note.” (6/26/37) An additional twenty five was paid three days later, and the balance of the loan was paid in August. (8/14/37)

The economy continued to falter. In August, Harwood received a letter from Caleb Brown, who had bought his production of cheese in previous years, indicating that he might not be able to buy in the current season. Harwood writes, “. . . whether he would want much cheese again could not say . . . Hoped I passed through the Squall without much loss. If so – had need to be thankful, for almost everyone had shared in the general ruin of the country.” (8/15/37).

Conclusions

Hiram Harwood continued his diary through October of 1837. Waters's activities are mentioned almost daily as they had been since his marriage to Diadamia. But then Harwood became progressively more debilitated by a mysterious illness, having nervous anxiety attacks and pains
in various parts of his body. The diarist mentioned suicides and deaths in the community as he fell into a deep depression. Waters, Diadamia, and other family members tried to cheer and encourage him, but as Robert Shalhope has made clear in his *A Tale of New England*, Harwood fell into a bout of mental illness that ended with his commitment to the insane asylum, today’s Brattleboro Retreat. Ultimately, two years later, Hiram Harwood hung himself in the barn that Hiram Waters had built for him. Shalhope theorizes that Harwood’s depression and illness may have been the result of a serious head injury sustained falling out of the wagon.

Hiram Harwood’s death was surely a serious shock to both families. The friendship that began with making music and playing the flute had evolved over years into a deep family bond, and Waters relied on Harwood as an older male in the family to help with his business. Yet after Harwood’s death, the family soldiered on. Harwood’s wife Sally, sister Lydia, and his elderly father Benjamin pulled together to run the farm. Ultimately, the job passed to Harwood’s son Hopkins, who continued operations for fifty years until he lost the farm to debt in 1889, as reported by Shalhope.

Waters’s carpentry business continued successfully for many years, but one wonders if the link between the two families was diminished after Hiram Harwood’s death. The women would certainly have remained close – Diadamia and her sister Lydia were particularly supportive of one another throughout the years. Harwood’s daughter Adeline, too, would have continued to remain close having spent so much of her time in the Waters home.

For purposes of research, the Harwood diaries provide detailed proof of when the Hiram Waters home on Monument Avenue was built, and the date of its reconstruction after the fire. The original dwelling was started by 1829, and it was occupied several months after Waters's marriage to Diadamia Harwood in 1831. Hiram Waters continued to work on the kitchen of the house in 1832, and the original structure -- saved from the 1834 fire -- was renovated, and perhaps expanded, between 1834 and 1836. The carpentry shop was re-erected in early 1836, and presumably finished within a year or two of its raising.

The great bonus of reading the Harwood diaries was getting to know Hiram Waters himself. After the death of Hiram Harwood, knowledge of the family continues but only through public records, which are far less intimate. The 1840s were apparently a booming time for Waters’s business. The census that year discloses that ten people were living in the house and shop -- Hiram, Diadamia, 1 girl between 15 and 19 (probably a young housemaid), the three Waters girls and 4 additional men between 15 and 29. Five of these people were said to be engaged in manufacture or
trade – presumably Hiram and 4 apprentices or journeymen.

The 1850s, by contrast, seem to have been leaner times. The census shows that the house was inhabited by the Waters family plus one 20-year-old apprentice, Dewey Dunham. The Bennington town clerk’s records show that Waters mortgaged his land in 1850 to Isaac McDaniels, then sold properties to Henry Root in 1852 and S.H. Blackmer in 1853 and 1854. He mortgaged the house and joinery shop to Alvin Benedict in 1853-55 and paid off this debt in 1860. It is not known if these financial stresses were due to economic conditions leading to the nationwide financial panic of 1857, or some other financial duress.

According to property records, the house was legally divided into two dwellings in 1856-57 when Waters sold the shop side of the double structure to Mrs. Mary F. Fassett, a dressmaker, who lived there with her daughter Catherine and son-in-law William Haswell. This may have been when the left front room was added to the original structure. This room may have served as Hiram’s new shop with its own separate front door, or it is possible that Waters used one of his outbuildings as a shop.

Diadamia lived until 1864. Daughters Lydia, Adeline, and Mary Jane grew up to lead productive lives. Two remained unmarried – Lydia kept house and Adeline became a music teacher. Mary Jane married a young missionary, Frederick Hicks, but was soon widowed. She moved back into the family home with her infant son, to live with her two sisters and elderly father and became a school teacher. Mary Jane’s child, Frederick, spent
his childhood in the house and then died of appendicitis while studying at Williams College. The oldest daughter, Lydia, died in 1884.

Hiram Waters’s contribution to the visual landscape of Old Bennington was enormous. Unfortunately, his brother-in-law’s diaries provide only about fifteen years of data, but if these are any indication, Waters was a prolific architect and builder. When Harwood died, Waters was at the prime of his career. Subsequent census records confirm that his business continued to thrive for many years. As the town’s most experienced master carpenter, he must have been the architect of many of Bennington’s Greek Revival structures well into the 1840s, ’50s, and even ’60s. Hiram Waters lived until 1890 at the age of 94 and is buried in the Bennington Center Cemetery beside Diadamia. ❑