

The excitement somewhat abated but was still a matter of conversation and all manners of opinion were expressed in reference to the probable cause of death. It was expressed that an unventilated cellar does not furnish a satisfying cause for such a quick and terrible fatality. It is interesting to note that the results of the water analysis was never publicized. So it is left for the reader to decide which possibility (or could it be a combination of both) was the cause of this terrible illness which caused the death of so many people so quickly.

*The Daily News* of 30 March 1889 deemed it necessary to relay a warning to their readers regarding the keeping of decaying vegetables in their cellars; "What ever is found to have been the disease with which members of the family of E. Pembroke died, it is safe to assume that the principal cause of it was the unhealthful surrounding of the home where the malady first appeared.

Last fall, as usual, a supply of vegetables for the winter was put under the house, and several weeks ago they began to decay. The odor soon become offensive, but the rotten stuff was not removed. The fumes rose up and went through the house being unable to escape in any other direction. The occupants of the house lived in that foul air day after day, breathing the poison over and over again until they were stricken. The house was seldom aired. The well from which water for drinking and cooking purposes was obtained is situated in the barn-yard, and the water was absolutely unfit for use. About the first thing the physician did was to order that no water from that well should be used by the patients. In many other respects the sanitary conditions of the Calkins home were remarkably bad.

A man who was familiar with the surroundings gave this description of the place to *THE NEWS* concluding by saying: "It was mighty unhealthy there. It couldn't help but be. But half of the farmhouses in the country are not better."

Many houses and their immediate surroundings are little else than breeders of disease; and in this fact lies a warning to those who feel themselves interested. Too much regard cannot be paid to health and the means of preserving it. It is a warning to farmers that should be heeded and look into the question of sanitation. Let the fate of the Calkinses be a warning to others.

Thus ends the story of the East Pembroke Mystery-Tragedy.

### Other Related Items Regarding The Calkins Family Mystery ~ Tragedy

The Chester Calkins residence was located across the road from the house where Margaret Tirolese lives today. (2001) The Bradley Calkins home was on the Read Road directly behind Chester's house.

Rev. Samuel Calkins was Pastor of the North Darien Baptist Church where he ministered to the spiritual needs of his people for several years. The entire community mourned the death of he and his wife.

D. C. Smith and his son-in-law James Shedd who died on March 6th and 14th respectively lived almost directly across the street from the Chester Calkins residence. James Shedd also died from Typhoid Pneumonia. One wonders if they used the well from the Calkins house.

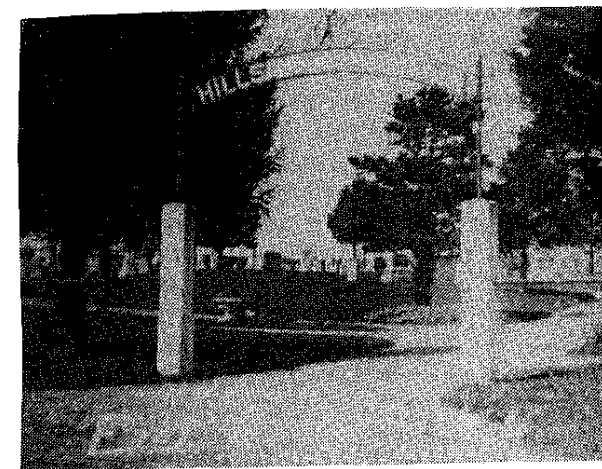
Don Read relates that his grandmother, Mrs. Charles Seamans was the only local resident in East Pembroke who would go near the stricken Calkins home. She would go daily and take them food. She didn't go in the house but handed the food to them through the back door.

If you are interested in the complete articles from the local papers regarding this tragedy contact the Town of Pembroke Historians.

Calkins		
Amanda	age 68	March 16
Chester	age 76	March 19
Bradley	age 62	March 26
Zerviah	age 59	March 27
Rev. Samuel	age 59	March 26
Charlotte	age 42	March 27
Susan M.	age 66	March 22
1889		

Hillside Cemetery, East Pembroke, NY

# An 1889 East Pembroke Mystery - Tragedy!



Hillside Cemetery  
East Pembroke

DID  
YOU  
KNOW

?

Town of Pembroke Co-Historians  
Lois Brockway  
Joan Arnold  
2001

### **East Pembroke, NY - 1889**

As March of 1889 was ushered in the residents of this small village were most likely looking forward to winter ending and spring arriving. Revival meetings were being held at the Baptist Church, a late snow storm had left snow on the ground, and the Pembroke Band had delighted audiences with a concert. Two residents of Richville had just returned after attending the Presidential Inauguration of Benjamin Harrison in Washington, D.C. Thieves had recently visited the railroad station, Rural Seminary and the hardware store, but no one was prepared for the malady that was soon to visit this busy community.

Word quickly spread through the village that Chester, Amanda and Susan Calkins (a brother and two sisters) who lived on the Angling Road were ill with an unknown disease. On March 16, Amanda died followed three days later by Chester. Relatives becoming concerned began to arrive to care for the ailing family. A brother, Rev. Samuel Calkins and his wife, Charlotte came from North Darien. Meanwhile another brother, Bradley and his wife, Zerviah who lived nearby were also in attendance on the sick ones, and when Susan, the last member of the household breathed her last, Mrs. Bradley Calkins was added to the list of the sick and was immediately taken back to her home.

The Rev. Samuel Calkins and his wife were both stricken down and little hope was held for their recovery. A nurse was obtained from Batavia to attend to the sick. On March 26 (just 10 days after the first death) Rev. Calkins breathed his last. His wife was not expected to survive him long. The nurse was down sick and returned to Batavia where she was put under quarantine.

### **Panic Arrives**

Almost everyone in the village arrived at the post office daily awaiting the arrival of the mail and to hear the latest gossip. One can just imagine the concern and worry that passed through the village as one after another of the Calkins family fell ill. The residents, especially those whose homes were located in the vicinity where the sick people were began to panic. One resident said, "They gather in groups on the streets and discuss the situation with blanched faces and gaze at the house of death from afar off, with a dread that is plainly shown by their countenances." They probably wanted to help but were afraid to go near the Calkins home as no one seemed to know the cause of the sickness. One brave neighbor, Mrs. Charles Seamans, ventured to the aid of the ill and took food which was left at the door.

### **Meanwhile Death Marches on....**

Bradley Calkins passed on the afternoon of the 26th. The Rev. Samuel and Bradley were buried in the new cemetery near the Calkins' home, where all those who had died were laid side by side. The next morning (27th) both wives joined their husbands in death and were taken to the Hillside Cemetery.

Thus within eleven days all of the Calkins families had met their death with what some called typhoid pneumonia caused from the fumes of rotting vegetables located in the cellar of the Chester Calkins home. One has to remember that old farm houses of that time period were not very tightly secure and it was easy for poisonous fumes to drift up through floor boards that had shrunk through the years. Plus the fact that it was reported that the Calkins cellar had no outside entrance and the windows had been bricked over so there was no ventilation in the cellar.

The final episode of the E. P. malady ended on March 28th when the last member of this illness, Mrs. Emily Kendall (the attending nurse) died in Batavia. A man was appointed to patrol the sidewalk in front of her house to prevent anyone from entering or leaving. Her

bedding was burned. The final total of this terrible tragedy was that eight people were gone from this earth, five of whom went to help the original three who became ill.

### **Investigation Begins in a Panic Stricken Community**

An investigation was begun to discover, (if possible) the origin and nature of the terrible disease that swept away eight people. A meeting was held in Rural Seminary at E.P. Alvin Kidder presided at the meeting. The object of the gathering was to adopt measures to prevent the spread of the disease, if it was found to be contagious. The meeting was called due to a rumor that someone intended to take away from the Chester Calkins house, where the first deaths occurred, a quantity of bedding, etc., upon which the patients had lain, and it was deemed advisable to take some action at once.

Two people were appointed to meet with the Health Physician for the Town, Dr. Crane of Corfu. Eight others were appointed as a committee for the protection of the community to watch for the individual who had threatened to come and take the bed clothing. The State Health Department was contacted but they turned the matter back to local authorities. Dr. Crane diagnosed the cause of death as typhoid pneumonia caused by a polluted well. Other doctors in the area argued that it was caused from the poisonous fumes coming from the cellar.

### **Water or Decaying Vegetables??**

Harry Gillett, a son-in-law of Bradley Calkins sent a bottle of the water to Buffalo for analysis. The Pembroke Town Board met and decided to have a chemist come from Rochester to analyze the water.