

**The First Frontier:  
Chautauqua County in the Unfolding  
Of America's History**

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**Bicentennial Celebration**

**Westfield, New York**

**July 20, 2002**

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3. This was the “first frontier” of the new republic. The geometry of land sales and ownership and the pattern for towns and counties established here would be duplicated elsewhere as the frontier unfolded west. The frontier-pioneer pattern was established in this neighborhood, then called the Holland Purchase.
4. It was our pioneer ancestors who finally gave the area its permanent definition. They were Yankees for the most part and they brought Yankee values, customs, and traditions with them.

This area was redefined and gained permanency because pioneers valued risk taking and demonstrated uncommon courage. These two values, risk taking and uncommon courage, were essential for survival and progress in the early frontier period and still hold importance for us 200 years later.

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Chautauqua County grew, prospered, and took its place in American history because individuals with vision were willing to take risks, often very significant risks; and, they were willing to lead. No chapter in the history of this county required greater risk taking and committed leadership than the frontier period. No individuals demonstrated greater courage and forbearance than our pioneer ancestors on the frontier. No group of Chautauquans ever had a bolder vision.

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The “First Frontier: Chautauqua County in the Unfolding of American History,” is our topic for the next few minutes.

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When Americans think of the frontier, minds wander to “cowboys and Indians,” John Wayne movies, and the American west. But west is a relative direction, and for the new American republic, the west started right here in what would become Chautauqua County.

You will enjoy our topic today if you have an imagination and can identify with the likes of James Thurber’s most wonderful character Walter Mitty. You may recall Walter Mitty, the day dreaming hero of Thurber’s most popular short story, who enjoyed an imagined life as a naval hero, a world-class surgeon, a tough guy, and an air ace. He was, in truth, a hen-pecked fellow from Waterbury, Connecticut.

There is a bit of Walter (or Wilma) Mitty in all of us. We put ourselves in the news and wonder what we would have done and how we would have responded in challenging circumstances. We put ourselves in historical circumstances and wonder if we could have endured.

The pioneers who we recognize for establishing the first permanent settlements in this town and this county (the county was formally established in 1808) lived a life we can only imagine. And, we would argue, that their experience was beyond even the wild imaginings of Walter Mitty. It is at best difficult, and more likely impossible, for us to truly appreciate the enormity of the original events that we celebrate today, two hundred years later.

The concept of the frontier is one that we have difficulty fully appreciating in 2002. Americans have made attempts to recreate frontier communities but we have never re-created those communities (to my knowledge) at the opening moments of a frontier area. For example, there is Sturbridge Village in western Massachusetts. Sturbridge fashions itself as a rural-frontier community of the 1830s. By that time, Massachusetts had 210 years of Anglo-American history and nearby towns had celebrated their centennials or more. The true frontier experience in the trans-Appalachian region still remains largely unknown to us.

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We are here today because in 1802, James McMahan, his brother John, his friend Edward McHenry, and their anonymous wives and children determined to make their homes and livelihoods at "the Crossroads," the intersection of the Portage Trail and the trail from Buffalo to the

**Connecticut Fire Lands (later Paine's Road). They were the first "permanent white settlers."**

**It is important for us to note that the McMahons arrived at what was already seen as a "crossroads," that is, a pivotal point in the geography of the interior of the young republic.**

**Prior to 1802, few chose to stay here. Many, very many, passed through the area. It is no wonder that as the 19<sup>th</sup> century dawned, the region already carried the appellation—"crossroads." The area became a "crossroads" in prehistoric times because the main geological feature of the Chautauqua (Crossroads) region is the so-called Erie escarpment. It begins near Batavia and extends west along the lake plain towards Pennsylvania. The Erie escarpment defines the two major drainage systems of the northeast – those being the St. Lawrence River with its terminus in the Atlantic, and the Mississippi River system with its terminus in the Gulf of Mexico. Drainage directed native canoes, the flow of trade, and the expansion of cultures. The waters at the escarpment divide north and south.**

**As a result, the area had strategic importance to Native Americans, European empire builders, American colonists, and pioneers. It was here, on the Erie escarpment, that different cultures met, exchanged ideas, traded, and passed each other on their way north, west, and south. It can be safely said that while thousands passed through the immediate region,**

strangely enough, none endured here. Even the Indians relocated to areas some distance from “the crossroads.” While the area was a geologic/geographic lynchpin, other locales offered a more hospitable environment.

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Allow me to digress for a few moments to underscore “the crossroads characteristic” of the region throughout history.

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John Downs and Fenwick Hedley assert in the History of Chautauqua County, New York, and its People, that Indian trails, first made by Erie Indians and then used by Seneca Indians, were available to the first pioneers. Specifically:

**A broad and well worn trail led from Cattaraugus Creek through the lake towns to the Pennsylvania line. . . . An Indian path led along the east shore of Chautauqua Lake, and from the head of the lake by way of the Chautauqua Creek to Lake Erie. [Indian trails were numerous and extended in useful directions.]**

But earlier, there were stone-age people and their descendents who survived in the difficult environment of the area. Their burial mounds have been well documented. The closest, well-documented mound was just

down the road in Ripley. We can only dimly imagine the lives of those pre-historic first Americans.

Later, in the 1600s and early 1700s, French Jesuits, soldiers, and cour d'bois passed through this area in their effort to spiritually and economically unify an empire that stretched from Quebec to Lake Huron and south towards New Orleans. They would sail the length of the Lake Erie shore. Jesuits would accompany French troops as they established a fort and bakery, Camp Chatakoin, at what is now Barcelona. They would re-cut a trail from lake to lake deep within the county. For these first Europeans, this area was an avenue and a strategically important location that could facilitate or impede the consolidation of their frontier empire.

British troops and colonial Americans (including the young George Washington) would scout and infrequently skirmish with the French and Indians here; not out of a desire to seize and populate inhospitable territory, but to tip the larger European balance of power.

The American Revolution made this area a territory of the new republic. John Adams and the peace commissioners understood its potential significance. They insisted that in the Treaty of Paris, Britain cede the region to the United States but even then the area was only vaguely described.

In the late 1780s and early 1790s the new nation struggled and nearly collapsed save but for the extraordinary vigor and strength of the founding

fathers. This new territory was vaguely described in the Treaty of Paris as lying between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River. It was, as Adams insisted, ceded to the new nation but the new nation was not a strong union and the states laid claims and counter-claims overlapped. There was confusion and the desire for land ownership required titles. Native Americans had obvious legitimate claims and their hold on this area was not reduced until September 1797, at a council at Genesee.

The Indian title was extinguished at that once celebrated and now notorious council. The Holland Land Company, which had taken the risk and purchased the area for speculation in 1792, was free to sell parcels and whole tracts.

It is at this point that "the crossroads" for the first time ceases to be an avenue and becomes a destination.

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Six Dutch banking houses, long lobbied by John Adams, combined to form the Holland Land Company and purchased over 3,000,000 acres of wilderness that comprised what is now western New York.

The Dutch invested in nearly eight years of planning before opening the area to purchase and settlement. Their surveys, led by their first resident-

agent Joseph Ellicott, were models for the later unfolding of America's westward rolling frontier.

Ellicott, influenced by the Northwest Ordinance (1787), set out six square-mile townships subdivided into lots in an orderly geometry. And the Dutch, anxious to sell off their wilderness, were willing to cut rough roads, provide loans and sell for \$2.50 per acre with as little as 25 cents down.

The establishment of villages was encouraged through incentives to shopkeepers, tavern keepers, millers, and artisans.

Resident land agents became regional leaders and risk takers with vision. A land office with a resident agent was posted within the county at Mayville and that village would join Buffalo and Batavia as centers of economic activity within the Holland Purchase.

At the outset, Americans showed an interest in the land here. In fact, their interest was apparent by 1795 and 1796, a year and more before legitimate purchases could be made.

Clearly, this area witnessed a succession of people who lived here and passed through. The "crossroads" served as an avenue for thousands of years before the pioneer period. But pioneers would give the region definition and usher it into the modern period of history. Pioneers gave the region organization and infrastructure and they would bring their Yankee

**institutions with them. Permanence was their intention. At long last, “the crossroads” was to become a destination.**

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**Frontiersmen and women began to drift in.**

**In 1795, James McMahon worked his way up the Conewango on his way from Northumberland County, Pennsylvania, to what would become the northern part of Chautauqua County. He was impressed with the Lake plain location surrounding “the crossroads” and determined to return.**

**Probably the first American to spend any significant time here was a vagabond variously known as Amos Sawtell or Sottle. Sawtell gets little respect. He was a poacher who was here by 1796. Sawtell built a lean-to near the mouth of Cattaraugus Creek. He signed on as an axe man with various survey parties from time to time. In an era when pioneer wives were, at best, anonymous, Sawtell’s common-law wife is well remembered but not by name. She is remembered as “a very dark Indian,” or, perhaps an African-American woman who he met in the area.**

**During that same year, 1796, a survey party of 52 individuals reached Connecticut’s Western Reserve (Ohio) via Lake Erie. Along the way, some viewed the Lake Erie shore of the county with personal motives. Among them were three who would later become pioneer settlers of the county:**

Seth Pease, Augustus Porter, and Wareham Shepard. Pease would also become famous along with Moses Cleveland for his work laying out the city that bears the latter's name. Augustus Porter would also become an early centerpiece in the history of Buffalo. Other surveyors and land speculators traversed the region at about the same time.

As land speculators gained interest, a man named Skinner, probably another poacher, was known to live in the area and he operated the first tavern near Cattaraugus Creek as early as 1800.

Historians of the nineteenth century debated endlessly about who was the first settler. A few argued for Sawtell. Another few argued for Skinner. All agreed that neither man was the first permanent white settler or pioneer. That honor would belong to a McMahon who settled in what would become Westfield in what would become Chautauqua County.

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During this period, that is, prior to 1804, there was no Chautauqua County. This area was part of the Town of Batavia, Genesee County. Then in 1804, the Town of Chautauque was incorporated. The first land purchase in what would be Chautauque was made in 1801. In that year, James McMahon who had wandered up the Conewongo and through the county south to north, returned and purchased for his brother John a large portion of townships 3 and 4 in range 14 from the Holland Land Company. Their sites were located in what would later become the towns of Westfield and Ripley.

**James McMahon purchased on speculation knowing that his Northumberland County, Pennsylvania, family, friends, and others would, in turn, purchase land from his brother. He was right.**

**In 1801, John Allen purchased lot 4. But Allen is lost to history and apparently was in no rush to move to the new frontier.**

**In 1802, James McMahon purchased lot # 13. Six other purchases involving nine other buyers followed suit the same year, making their purchases from John McMahon. By 1809, John McMahon had sold off 6,185 acres of his purchase and determined to keep the remainder and purchase more. John and James together would purchase nearly 27,000 acres from the Holland Land Company over several years, largely for speculation. They were clearly risk takers.**

**The financial arrangements encouraged purchases on a grand scale. John McMahon's purchase of 22,014 acres at \$2.50 an acre amounted to \$55,035. John McMahon's down payment was a mere \$1,035 or .018 (1.8%). The balance was due and payable in eight annual installments with annual interest. This was clearly a daunting task with great risk for those who spent their last to get to the region, and provision themselves for the first winter and spring.**

**Hundreds and then thousands of others would join the McMahons. Turner, writing in the 1840s, wrote that:**

The pioneers were as poor a class of men, generally, as ever became founders of new settlements. Many of them got possession of their lands by paying mere nominal sums in advance; in some instances not over twenty-five cents. There are now in Chautauque . . . many families whose last dollar was spent when they had arrived at their locations in the forest, erected their log cabins, and supplied themselves with some scanty stores of provisions....[They made] long journeys on foot, through wilderness paths, and primitive roads; returning with a peck of meal, perhaps a bag of flour, and sometimes with but a few potatoes, for the sustenance of themselves and families.

The parcels closest to the Lake Erie shore and the Chautauque Creek or portage were the first settled. Montana State University geographer William Wyckoff has studied western New York geography in historical context and tells us that the terrain was tough, the environment difficult and thickly forested with black walnut, hickory, whitewood (poplar), maple, hemlock, beech, white ash, butternut, oak, white pine, black cherry, elm and chestnut. The forests supported a dense undergrowth of wild grape vines entangled with sassafras, spice bush and assorted strangling impediments. The land was valueless until cleared.

Pioneers did not record immediate testimony of their challenges. A few left their reminiscences much later in life. Fortunately for us today, American and European visitors at the time did record what they discovered as they traveled through this first frontier which opened in the earliest days of the new republic.

Pioneers in the Holland Purchase cleared their newly purchased wild lands by axe and fire. Trees were felled at the initially convenient height of three

or four feet and the stumps were left to rot. The largest trees were cut deeply, girdled and left to die over a period of years.

The pioneer's yard was an understandable mess. It was generally a "half-cut clearing," according to Professor Charles E. Brooks in *Frontier Settlement and Market Revolution: The Holland Purchase*.

Brooks, quoting contemporary observers, notes that:

The settlers log house [always a one room cabin] was hardly distinguishable from the jumble of timber and debris that surrounded it. The scene . . . included a straggling rail fence, put up to protect a hastily planted vegetable garden. The new homestead was covered with an inextricable mass of prostrate trunks, branches and trees, piles of split logs, and [later] of squared timbers, planks, shingles, great stacks of [wood for] fuel, and often in the midst of all this could be detected a half-smothered log hut.

A season or two after the cabin was put up; the next phase of clearing began. The chopping that had been cut was burned. The objective was to build a hot, roaring fire that would consume as much as possible of the tangled mass of fallen trees and underbrush. If the wind was right and the timber was ready to burn, the fire spread quickly, engulfing the area in a rolling wave of flame and smoke. Whatever survived the burn, usually blackened stumps, trunks, or other large limbs, was cut, piled, and left to be burned again.

Many historians of the period reported that the earliest pioneer families had to contend with bears and wolves. Children, left unprotected, were sometimes victims.

Orsamus Turner wrote in his *Pioneer History of the Holland Purchase* (1850), that wild game and fish were abundantly available to the pioneers.

Further, he noted:

Deer was very plenty [sic.], all this region was a reserve. The young Indian hunters were prohibited by an edict of council from hunting deer within a given number of miles from their village, in order to give the old men a chance. Trout used to be abundant in the small streams.

Native Americans' concern for their own elders further increased the bounty of our pioneer ancestors.

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Our knowledge of the region's frontier characters is enhanced by the fact that many of them rolled west with the unfolding frontier. As a result, there is an interesting and enlightening pattern in the settlement of Chautauqua County (and all of western New York). Many of the Yankees who first left New England and settled here later moved on, increasing their worth along the way. We get glimpses of them in New England histories, then in eastern New York, and later here in western New York. Subsequently, some would make their mark in the Western Reserve, Michigan, Kansas, and further west.

The Wayne County (Michigan) Pioneer and Historical Collections includes an interesting account of one such person, an early postman in Chautauqua County, Luther Harvey.

Grace Smith, drawing from sources, reports in the Wayne County record:

About 1806, Joel Harvey [originally from Vermont] took a contract under Post-Master General Granger, to carry the mail from Buffalo to Erie, [thought to be] about 100 miles, once a week. Joel made the first trip with his son Luther, who thenceforward carried the mail regularly, summer and winter, for two years. He staid a week in Erie to meet the Southern mail, another week being consumed in going and returning. There was then a house at Fredonia, another at Chautauqua. Cattaraugus and Chautauqua Rivers were not bridged, and at the latter was no ferry. In good weather, he went on horseback, in bad weather on foot, as it was impossible for a horse to ford the streams, or get through the woods and swamps. Young Harvey thinks he never missed a trip. Once while traveling with his horse, he was belated and chased by wolves to Fredonia – then called by its Indian name, Canadaway. The mail was very light, often containing nothing.

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Andrew W. Young and other historians of the county report that “After the settlement of Colonel McMahon and Mr. McHenry [who opened a tavern at “the crossroads”], settlers came in rapidly. Most of them settled on the road nearly opened toward Erie.” Young and others also agree that “the settlement at the Crossroads was soon followed by that at Canadaway [Fredonia].”

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There was soon a steady stream of pioneers entering the region.

The increase in numbers did not significantly diminish the hardships faced by new arrivals. Perhaps the most chronicled arrival in the area occurred in 1805 with the arrival of Zattu Cushing and his family.

Cushing was a shipbuilder from Plymouth, Massachusetts. His odyssey carried him and his family first to central New York. Allow me to share with you, one account of their subsequent trip to this area. This is titled "February, 1805, on the Arrival of Zattu Cushing." It is from an unfinished work titled, Laden Down: Episodes in the History of Chautauqua County, New York. The Cushings left the village of Paris, Oneida County, New York, to open new lands at Canadaway.

It seemed as though their lives would end at any moment. The wind on the frozen lake was blowing a steady twenty knots and gusting more often at two and three times that speed. The snow wasn't falling, it was slamming into them. His right side was encrusted with snow and ice. The oxen weren't often visible but when last seen they had iced over. Their heaving and sweating produced ice which, mixed with the heavy snow, obscured them save for the steam that rose from their lee sides and snouts.

His hands, feet, and face were frozen. He was certain everyone in the party was frightened. They had two sleds. Every several minutes his huge sled struck another obstruction in the ice and threw him into the crates at the front. He no longer hurt. He was heavy with numbness and he knew that if they didn't seek shelter and warmth soon, they would lose their fingers and toes.

The snow stung as it pelted his face. His eyes burned when he faced into the snow and wind but he continued doing so. He knew that the lake would reflect more light than the wooded shore. The day was already beginning to darken and he wanted to be certain that when he looked in the other direction the darkness of the shore would still be discernible. Looking towards the shore was somehow

comforting. He believed he had just a very short distance to go. But he was wrong.

He had fashioned the sleds from rough-hewn lumber. They were so heavy the oxen struggled to move them until they caught the accumulating snow. At Buffalo they found the ice on the Lake Erie shore, which eased the drag sufficiently to put them on the lake's frozen surface. He had dragged his heavy wooden crates out on the ice and re-loaded both sleds offshore. The sleds were fourteen feet in length and eight a beam. He intended to keep the crates below the line of sight but one crate stood atop the others partially blocking his vision of the frozen lake ahead. The crates contained a few household items, a full barrel of salt, a half-bushel of apple seeds, feed for the two yoke of oxen and four cows, as well as flour, meal, dried apples, jerky, soap, lye, tallow and other provisions.

He found himself thinking about wolves stalking them and then he would lean far to the right to peer around the obstruction.

The surface of the sled had turned to ice where he stood and twice within the last hour he slipped and fell heavily. Both times he caught himself before he slipped off the moving sled. The second time he hurt his wrist badly. It bled and began to swell. He knew that if he fell unconscious from the sled, the oxen would struggle on and his wife and children would be in danger. The two ax men who accompanied them were ahead of the sleds with the oxen and would never see him fall or hear his cries.

They could make it, possibly even today. It might snow for several more days. If they could make Canadaway, then they would stop and end their journey laden down as they were under the weight of the wood. He desperately wanted to stop but he knew if he did he would never get on with his life. His family trusted in him and for the first time he began to doubt himself.

The closing darkness posed a risk. There would be no moon, no light. If they didn't reach the outlet of the creek soon, they would be lost. The oxen needed rest or they would die of their own exertion. The thought crossed his mind, who will ever know about this day? He began blowing the dinner horn in fear and anxiety.

Another early Chautauqua pioneer saved Cushing and his family that fateful day by sounding his own dinner bell in return and guiding the Cushings to shore.

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The heroic lives of the McMahons, Cushings, McHenry and others were real and common. In the spring of 1802, Edward McHenry would have the honor of being the first to move his family into the county, perhaps he hurried because his wife was in her second trimester of pregnancy. In August, 1802, she delivered a son, John Mc Henry, who became the first documented baby born to pioneers here. Sadly, the McHenry's would lose their father and husband the following year. In September 1803, Edward McHenry drowned while attempting to sail from the Crossroads to Erie to fetch supplies. His crude boat was powered by a makeshift sail fashioned from a blanket. Thus Edward McHenry earned a third "first" in county history. That is, his was the first recorded pioneer death and funeral service. His friends and relatives persevered.

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Death frequently found young adventurers on the frontier but they kept coming and soon filled the area in astonishing numbers. Townships were organized. The county was established in 1808. Towns were divided and subdivided as populations expanded. And many of the first pioneers found themselves crowded and moved even further west. This first frontier represented just the first chapter in the unfolding of America's history. They inherited geography and made the most of it. They took advantage of the strategic location and made the most of it. They had a vision of the

**future and they worked towards it. They took risks with their fortunes and their lives and many prospered and survived. And they established a pattern of development and success here that would be built upon all across America as both the continent and America's history unfolded.**

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**As we look back on these past few minutes we have shared, I hope it is obvious that the five lessons I briefly outlined at the outset are evident in our history. That is:**

- 1. Chautauqua County represents a colorful thread in the larger fabric of American history.**
- 2. This area has long been a "crossroads" and the geography will not change. That can and should be an advantage.**
- 3. This was the first frontier of the new republic. The American frontier-pioneer pattern was established here.**
- 4. Pioneers gave this area its permanent definition, which included Yankee values, customs, and traditions.**
- 5. Pioneers valued risk taking and demonstrated uncommon courage – essential values for success here and throughout American history then and now.**

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**Clearly, the pioneers who filled our early history were extraordinary Americans. Unlike Walter Mitty, they did not see themselves as heroes. They approached each day as it came and took their challenges entirely in stride.**

**The pioneers who settled here two hundred years ago were risk takers with vision and uncommon courage. What is amazing to us today is that they came to this frontier in such overwhelming numbers and then swept on, rolling the frontier further and further west – always beyond the edge of comfort and safety.**

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**That is our snapshot, a small segment of the larger portrait.**

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**Thank you for your very kind attention. And thank you for allowing Elaine and I to share this commemoration with you.**

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