ELIAL TODD FOOTE, HISTORIAN

A paper presented at a meeting of the Chautauqua County Historical Society October 2, 1976 by Herbert A. Beckman
One hundred sixty one years ago what is now Jamestown was a tiny settlement on the Chadakoin River called The Rapids. There were only ten or twelve rude houses, a sawmill, a gristmill, a small wool carding shop and a carpentry shop. It was to this tiny hamlet that Elial Foote came in 1815 at the age of 20. He was born May 1, 1796 at Greenfield, Mass., the son of Deacon Samuel and Sybil Doolittle Foote. At an early age his family moved to Sherburne, Mass. Here he was educated at the local school and at Oxford Academy. He then received some training in medicine, consisting of "reading" and attending lectures in New York City in the winter of 1814-1815, so that he was licensed to practice medicine by the authorities of Chenango County.

On arriving in this area he learned that there was only one doctor in the southern part of the county and was persuaded to settle in Jamestown and practice his profession here. He found plenty of need for his services and his later reminiscences give a colorful account of riding horseback in all kinds of weather to attend his patients. He often spent the night at the house of a settler, whose kindness and hospitality he later recorded gratefully. But he soon developed asthma which made this kind of life very exhausting and he limited his calls to the immediate area. In 1817 he married Anna Cheney who was the first of his three wives.

He now turned his attention to public office. In 1817 he was appointed assistant county judge, a post he held for seven years. Then from 1824 to 1844 he held the position of chief judge of the county. By 1827 the little community had grown enough to become an incorporated village. In 1829 he was appointed postmaster, an office
he held for 12 years. He also held the office of sheriff at one time. Meanwhile he began to buy land. In 1822 he bought a tract from William Peacock, the so-called reserved land. As a result he was often a rival of James Prendergast not only as to land titles but also as to water rights, a matter of vital importance to the operation of the mills on the Chadakoin River. At one time he owned much of the land on the east side of the village extending from Main Street toward Falconer. What is now Foote Avenue, then called Quaker Street, ran through his farm south from Chandler Street. Incidentally, he was generous in donating land for the building of three early churches, and was himself active in two such churches, Congregational and Presbyterian.

By this time Elial Foote had become one of the leading citizens of Jamestown. He was active in a county temperance society. He founded and was first president of the county medical society in 1818. In 1836 he was elected president of the board of trustees of the newly organized Jamestown Academy. He founded the first area bank and became its first president in 1831. He also founded the first Masonic lodge here. Meanwhile he had been elected to other public offices - the State Assembly in 1820, 1826 and 1827. In this connection it is interesting to note that during the Anti-Masonic furor of the 1820's Foote, as a Jacksonian Democrat and a Mason, was victorious in one election to the Assembly by the narrow margin of 19 votes.

He also engaged in some business ventures. In 1828 he opened a combined drug and general store. His medical supplies bought in New York City reached this remote community by sloop to Albany, freight wagon to Buffalo, sloop to Barcelona, wagon to Mayville and
keelboat to Jamestown, at a freight rate of five dollars per 100 pounds. In 1831 he was involved in the construction of the lighthouse at Barcelona and in a proposed steamboat line to run from Buffalo to Erie. He also had lumbering interests from his extensive land holdings.

In 1823 he built a home on the present site of the Jamestown High School.

About 1844 he moved to New Haven, Conn. The writer of this paper has been unable to discover any specific reason for this move except possibly that New Haven offered better opportunity for the practice of medicine. He died in that city on November 17, 1877. A funeral service was held in the Jamestown Congregational Church, and he is buried in a family plot in Lakeview Cemetery.

Up to this point the writer has made no reference to Foote's work as a historian. But from his early days in Jamestown he was concerned lest records and materials relating to the early history of the area be lost. So he began a collection of county newspapers. These he bound at his own expense in some 100 volumes. In addition he collected about 24 scrap books of notes, clippings and other memoranda - a project which was facilitated by the fact that as a judge he came into personal contact with many early settlers whose reminiscences he could record. In addition he searched public records in Albany, New York City and Washington. His hope was that all these papers and records could be preserved and filed for safe keeping in some library or similar place. In his last will dated 1871 he directed that all this material be kept in a proposed Foote Library and Historical
Society or that, failing this, the collection was to go to the historical society in Fredonia. This hope of a special library was never realized. He even drafted a bill presented to the state legislature for this purpose, but without result. This whole collection is now in the possession of the County Historical Society building in Westfield. Unfortunately the ravages of time have left it in such a fragile condition that it cannot be used by researchers and so this writer has not seen it. It is hoped, however, that eventually it can be microfilmed and then made available to future historians. What an invaluable storehouse of historical records this would provide!

Before these records became too fragile for use, however, they were consulted by some early historians. They became an important source for Young's History of Chautauqua County and were also used by Obed Edson in the history he wrote. A. Wellington Anderson, city historian of Jamestown several decades ago, also used parts of them for his "Conquest of Chautauqua". Foote also from time to time wrote letters to various county newspapers about his reminiscences of the early days. One such letter to the Jamestown Journal described in glowing terms the Jamestown of 1839 and 1843. He mentioned stores, factories, professional people, fire companies and even a musical band. In 1852 Foote returned to the village briefly to collect autographs and records of early settlers. He wrote similar letters to the Westfield Republican, the Fredonia Censor and the Chautauqua Democrat. He edited an abstract of the proceedings of the county board of supervisors from 1820 to 1867 based on original records supplemented by his own recollections. He wrote a history of county physicians to 1865
based on his reminiscences. He edited memoirs of Sam Brown, a lawyer and long time friend in 1864. He engaged in a lively controversy as to who was the first settler in the county. The dispute centered around the claims of two men. One was Colonel James McMahan who was believed to have settled in "Cross Corners" - now Westfield - in 1802. The other was a man named Sattle, about whom little is known. Foote strongly endorsed the claims of Col. McMahan. He left among his papers a rare and valuable pamphlet dated 1794 which recorded speeches of chiefs of the Seneca Indians and an appeal to President Washington. In 1873, now an old man in failing health, Foote returned to the county to address an old settlers festival in Fredonia on the need for preserving the early records. In the same year he made similar appeals in Forestville and Jamestown.

Here, then, is a brief account of the historical services of a man who was not only a leading citizen but the outstanding early historian of the county.