THE HOLLAND LAND COMPANY IN CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY

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by

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150 years ago, William Henry Seward, a young lawyer and newly appointed land agent, arrived at Dunkirk on a crowded steamboat. He represented Trumbull Cary, George W. Lay and Associates, who recently purchased from the Holland Land Company, over 300 thousand acres and all unpaid land contracts in Chautauqua County. In search of a place for the new land office, Seward scrutinized a couple of prospective villages on his way to Mayville. In a letter to his wife in Auburn he reported that "Dunkirk is to be a place of great importance, but it is now a miserable one." Seward "left Fredonia with the most favorable impression of the beauty of the village and the enterprise and hospitality of the people and with a strong bias toward locating (the) office there." However, he found Westfield even more beautiful than Fredonia, and "an improving and a flourishing one." Therefore, he decided to establish his Chautauqua Land Office in this village. Seward explained to David E. Evans, Resident Agent of the Batavia Land Office, that he "made this determination upon the ground, that the office in Westfield will be much less exposed to the turbulent spirit." Seward first "settled in the front drawing room in the large brick hotel kept by a Mr. Gale." In a couple of months, in September he moved to the McClurg mansion. Later, he built a new land office and obtained a house of his own.
The perpetrators of the "turbulent spirit," the people of the County were eagerly awaiting the arrival of Seward, who was acknowledged "a distinguished citizen," and a well supported anti-masonic Whig politician. According to a Fredonia Censor article, Seward’s character was "sufficient guarantee to the settlers that their rights and interests will be scrupulously respected." It was also believed that Seward’s reputation and sense of duty would not permit him "to become the author or the agent of wrong, or oppression in any form."

Little did the settlers know that in due time Seward would succumb to the lucrative lure of land speculation, and that he would become part owner of the Chautauqua lands, and would reserve the best water-side lots for himself, a practice, of which the previous land agents of the Holland Land Company were often accused.

The land transaction between the Holland Land Company and the new proprietors was a long drawn out and complicated one. The original contract for the Chautauqua land holdings was signed by Cary and Lay on January 1, 1835. Although the would-be-owners imposed rigorous terms on the destitute settlers for payment of their debts, they could not raise the nearly one million dollars purchase money. With the help of Seward, the land, and the settlers contracts were mortgaged with American Life Insurance and Trust Company, and by the end of 1839 the Holland Land Company received all payments and the cumbersome transaction was completed.
During the transitionary years, all participants suffered severe adversities. The question of ownership of the Chautauqua lands, the lack of money to pay the outstanding debts, and the fear of losing their family homesteads, caused serious concerns among the settlers. Many of them expressed their anxieties to the land owners, who ever they were. Numerous public meetings were called throughout the Holland Purchase, but the Chautauqua settlers were most dynamic in their demands for the continuation of easy credit terms and for the assurance of keeping their improved lands. When their repeated pleadings went unanswered, on February 6, 1836, a group, mostly from the southern part of the County, attacked the Mayville Land Office, forced open the recently built vault, and burned or carried off some ledgers that contained land payment records. For lack of a more visible culprit, the settlers also turned their wrath against subagent Peacock, who felt his life threatened and fled with his wife in the dark of the night.

Many memorable letters, most of which were addressed to the new proprietors, clearly illustrate the somber spirit of the times. The following example was written to Trumbull Cary by Judge John Birdsall of Mayville on February 18, 1836:
No man dares or cares to stand up for the terms of the Tariff. The people will not comply with it for the best of reasons: That they cannot. They are poor! Under the present state of things all must become poorer and the county more desolate. Don’t let excitement here produce irritation with you... Be cool. See things as they are... and present new terms at once to the settlers.

But Cary, who was desperately trying to raise the payment for his land purchase, was not ready to give in to anyone at this time. James Mullett from Fredonia pleaded on behalf of the Dutch, explained to Cary that:

The policy pursued by the Holland Land Company for 30 years past has been one of leniency (sic) and indulgence toward the settlers. No matter whether that policy originated in selfishness or not, it was one under which this vast wilderness has been populated and converted into blooming fields with a rapidity before unknown in the settlements of new countries. It was a policy well adapted to the times and circumstances attending the settlement of this country and the settlers would like to have it continued.

The Mayville Land Office riot was followed by several restless months. On the 18th of September, Seward was warned by a respectable merchant from Ripley that yet another mob from Gerry was to destroy the
Chautauqua Land Office in Westfield, and it was ready to shoot the new land agent. Seward removed some important documents from the office, called out the militia, but resolved "to stay and be killed." Eventually, the new owners announced more lenient payment terms, and Seward, with the silver tongue of an ambitious politician was able to pacify the settlers, and Chautauqua County returned to its peaceful daily existence.

When William Henry Seward decided against continuing the land office business in Mayville, he closed the door on almost 40 years of land development by a group of Dutch speculators that penetrated the Chautauqua wilderness and opened the way for frontier settlement. The saga of the Dutch started in 1791, when 6 Bankers from Amsterdam purchased over three million acres of land in Western New York from Robert Morris, who was one of the most prominent land speculators in America. The purchase, known as the Genesee or Holland Purchase, was not completed until September 1797, when the title to the land was obtained from the Seneca Indians for $100,000 and 200,000 acres for Reservations. In addition to the Western New York lands, the Dutch invested in 120,000 acres in the Cazenovia region. Another 80,000 acres were added with the purchase of the Adgate Patent, Servis Patent, part of the Steuben Patent, and later other small tracts in Oneida County, North of the Mohawk River.
During the 1790s, the Dutch also bought over one and a half million acres from James Wilson in Northwestern Pennsylvania, east and west of the Alleghany River. In addition, they invested large sums in federal and state bonds, bank shares, canal constructions, manufacturing and other internal developments. To administer their investments and the over five and a half million acres of land, in 1795 the six Amsterdam bankers organized a stock corporation, called the Holland Land Company.

Like most speculators the Dutch purchased the vast acreage for quick resale at a good profit. However, by the time the Company established itself in this country, completed the transactions and obtained title to the lands, the changing economic and political conditions prevented selling large tracts at high prices. Therefore, the alien land proprietors were forced to open their territories to individual settlers, who were seeking small lots for family homesteads. The Company's investments and land buying and selling activities were supervised by an Agent General in the Philadelphia headquarters, the only office directly responsible to the Board of Directors in Amsterdam. Theophile Cazenove, an entrepreneur for the Dutch bankers, was the first Agent General. He was succeeded by Paul Buati in 1799, who stayed in office until his death in 1824. John Jacob Vanderkemp,
the last Agent General closed the Philadelphia headquarters in 1855. For the purpose of land sales management, regional land offices were established and controlled by Resident Agents. John Lincklaen opened the first land office in Cazenovia in 1793. In 1818, he bought the Company lands on a 20 year credit. First Gerritt Boon, then Adam Mappa supervised the Oneida area Land Office, between 1793 and 1818, when he contracted for the unsold acreage. All of the above mentioned agents were of Dutch origin.

The Holland Purchase west of the Genesee River was the largest tract owned by the Holland Land Company, and its management was the most complex. Between 1797 and 1800 Joseph Ellicott, a well known surveyor, who had been employed by the Dutch since 1794, surveyed the land with 150 men. From the results of the survey, the first map of the Holland Purchase was drafted by Joseph Ellicott and his brother, Benjamin. In November 1800, Joseph Ellicott became the first Resident Agent of the Purchase and established the Company’s central office in Batavia. In it, he kept minute records of every conceived land contract, and with an iron fist, directed the development of towns and villages at key locations. Due to Ellicott’s sound judgement, strong sense of order, visionary foresight and tireless energy, within 20 years the unbroken wilderness was transformed into flourishing
frontier communities. As the settlement expanded, subagencies were opened in various quarters. The first subagency was set up in 1810 in Mayville, under the direction of William Peacock, who also surveyed most of the Chautauqua land and conducted the development of the County for over a quarter of a century. The next subagency opened in 1818 in Ellicottville in Cattaraugus County by David Goodwin. And in 1826, Ira Blossom became the subagent of the Buffalo Land Office in Erie County.

Due to ill health and political pressure, Paul Busti asked Joseph Ellicott to resign as Resident Agent in 1821. Jacob S. Otto from Philadelphia took over the agency of the Batavia Land Office until his death in 1827. In the same year, David E. Evans was appointed as the third Resident Agent. During his administration, the Holland Purchase was sold to several area land speculators. Trumbull Cary and Associates purchased most of the unsold land in Chautauqua County. Nicholas Devereux and Company bought land mainly in Cattaraugus County. Jacob LeRoy and Heman Redfield obtained the rest of the land in Alleghany, Erie, Genesee, Niagara and Wyoming Counties.
Archives of the Holland Land Company

By 1840, the Holland Land Company sold all its land holdings in the United States. Some regional land offices were closed, others were continued by the new land owners, who retained the original land sales ledgers. Other documents, including voluminous correspondence, remained in the hands of Holland Land Company agents, surveyors, and other employees. Certain material, like deeds, survey records and maps were turned over by the Company to the State of New York, as stipulated in an act by the Legislature on the 30th of April 1839. The rest of the documents were sent to the Philadelphia headquarters. In 1856, after the headquarters closed, all accumulated documents were shipped to Amsterdam, where they were put into the custody of the P. and C. Van Eeghen Firm. The descendants of that firm are still legal guardians.

Throughout the years, American researchers often expressed interest in these important regional historical records which were never readily available for public use in this country. The Library of Congress sporadically tried filming them, but it was not successful in raising the necessary funds. In response to the microfilming plans, the Van Eeghen family placed the documents in the Municipal Archives of Amsterdam. There Wilhelmina Pieterse organized the Collection to constitute the Archives of the Holland Land Company, and prepared an Inventory, which was published by the Municipal Printing Office in 1976.
Renewed interest in microfilming the Holland Land Company records sprang from a thesis research at the State University of New York, College at Fredonia. Grant proposals were written for bibliographic and physical assessment of the manuscripts in The Netherlands and in the United States. Funds were provided by the Gebbie Foundation in Jamestown, and several regional foundations, historical societies and other organizations, which made possible the Holland Land Company Manuscript Preservation Project. The assessment and microfilming of the Archives of the Holland Land Company in Amsterdam was completed in 1984 on 202 reels. A set of positive microfilms is available at the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress, at the Genealogical Society of Utah, in New York Public Library, in the New York State Library, and in Reed Library at the College at Fredonia.

The Archives of the Holland Land Company spans between the years of 1789 and 1869. It contains investment proposals, actual investment reports, land purchase negotiations, financial reports, land sale ledgers with contracts, payments, deeds, warrants, patents, and tax assessments. There are court records and related legal papers, a variety of miscellaneous printed and manuscript documents, and a wealth of correspondence between the owners, land agents, bankers, legal representatives, and the settlers, written in English primarily, and in Dutch and French. The Archives also includes a valuable collection of maps.
Holland Land Company documents that were left in the United States mostly in private hands were eventually donated to various repositories. Under the auspices of the Holland Land Company Manuscript Preservation Project an assessment of these documents and related material is in progress since 1983. Of the identified repositories in New York State, the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society holds one of the most significant groups of Holland Land Company Records. It contains the Joseph Ellicott Correspondence from 1798 to 1821, which is an integral part of the original Archives of the Holland Land Company. Another group of documents is known as the Henry Glowacki Papers. It contains transfer records, deeds, and other items of the 1835 land purchase by Jacob LeRoy and Heman Redfield in Orleans, Niagara, Genesee and Erie Counties. A small collection of the Trumbull Cary Papers concentrates on the transfer of the Chautauqua lands, and on the turbulent period of 1836.

The Patterson Library in Westfield is the depository of a set of unique plat maps of Townships in Ranges 10-15 which is Chautauqua County, and an almost complete set of land sales ledgers of the Mayville Land Office from 1803 to 1836, and of the Chautauqua Land Office from 1836 to about 1870. In addition, there is a set of mortgage records and a large collection of loose documents which contains valuable letters by William Henry Seward, George W. Patterson and other Chautauqua Land Office employees.
The Holland Land Office Museum in Batavia holds a group of Holland Land Company ledgers from 1801 that were continued by the staff of LeRoy and Redfield up to the 1860s. Another 26 volumes of the Farmers' Loan and Trust Company contain sales of and mortgage payments on the LeRoy and Redfield lands. A set of plat maps of the lower Townships in Ranges 1-9, and some early business papers of Trumbull Cary are also in this library.

The New York State Archives in Albany houses copies of the original deeds of the Holland Purchase and other legal documents relating to the Robert Morris purchase transactions. The Archives also preserved some important maps and almost complete sets of field notes of the Grand Survey and Township surveys, which are available on microfilm. In addition, there are about 60 volumes of Holland Land Company land sales ledgers and deed books.

The Department of Manuscript and University Archives of Olin Library at Cornell University in Ithaca, the Oneida County Historical Society in Utica, the Lorenzo Historic Site in Cazenovia and several other repositories in New York and Pennsylvania, house a variety of Holland Land Company documents and related material. Of the located
collections, lists are being prepared, and they will be published as a supplement to the Pieterse Inventory. Eventually, not yet microfilmed collections will be filmed and added to the microfilm set of the Archives of the Holland Land Company in Reed Library at the College at Fredonia.

The Archives of the Holland Land Company and the supplementary collections in New York State repositories and elsewhere, offer a great deal more than just ordinary land records. The Archives alone is valuable as the documentation of an early foreign investment corporation that provided financial aid to the federal government and invested in a variety of emerging internal improvements. The cumulative collections contain important documentation of the social, economic, cultural and political development on Holland Land Company territories from the formative years well into the second half of the nineteenth century. Therefore, the collections are important for research in history, political science, business, economics, anthropology, geography, biology, and other related fields. For surveyors and cartographers the collections are a gold mine of comprehensive survey records and historical maps of Dutch owned territories and other regions. For genealogists they offer endless opportunities in searching for predecessors among thousands of settlers' names in land sale ledgers and other documents.
Although, the original intent of the Holland Land Company was to harvest a large profit quickly on land speculation in the United States, at the end of an almost 50 year investment their gain was a mere six percent. In the process they developed in Western New York and in other regions flourishing frontier communities and aided the opening of a century of westward migration. Therefore, the preserved documents, another lasting legacy of this process, should be considered an essential historical treasure and an every day research collection for those who study American grassroots history.
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8. John Birdsall to Trumbull Cary, February 18, 1836.
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September 10, 1986

Mr. Roderick Nixon  
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Westfield, New York 14787

Dear Mr. Nixon:

I thought you would like to know that I sent copies of my paper, "The Holland Land Company in Chautauqua County" to those who left their addresses with me. Enclosed you will find a copy for the Historical Society, as it was announced at the meeting that a copy will be deposited there.

Thank you for writing me for a presentation.

Sincerely yours,

Franciska Safran  
Project Director

FS: xp

cc: J. Carter Rowland, VP, SUNY at Fredonia  
John P. Saulitis, Director, Reed Library