JAMES McCLURG AND HIS "FOLLY"

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August 4, 1951

James McClurg was born in Ireland, (his grandparents had migrated from the Scottish Highlands about 1650) in 1785. Because his father was suspected by the English of being active in the Irish Rebellion, he had to leave his country when he was thirteen. His first home in this new country was Philadelphia, then he moved to Pittsburg. There James, with his father and brothers, started an Iron Foundry, making, among other things, furnaces.

In 1809, when he was twenty-four, having received his birthright from his father because he didn't want to continue living in Pittsburg, he came to Westfield, then called The Four Corners. He stayed for a time with David Eason, becoming interested in David's sister Martha. He went West a ways, perhaps as far as Cleveland looking for a place to settle, but he returned here in 1810, Believing the excellent shipping facilities at Barcelona made this a good place to go into business.

He married Martha Eason, and purchased Lot 13 in Range 14 of Township 4 from John McMahen in lands of the tract bought by him from the Holland Land Company. Then he built a two-room log and frame building, believed to be the first in town of its kind. Even then he was ahead of the times: a frame dwelling instead of the standard log cabin. He lived in one room of his house on the corner of the Common, and in the other room ran a general store. He was, and I quote, the town's first merchant and a successful financier.

It was in the formative stage of the Village that his influence was largely felt. About 1827 McClurg built the block of wooden dwellings and the Westfield House, a large brick hotel of three stories and sixty-five rooms, reputed to be the best hotel west of Albany. He told his grandson that he brought a special skilled mechanic from Pittsburg to construct the stairs. He purchased the David Eason farm and divided it into Village lots, which he sold. With Judge Campbell and George Hall, in 1831, he built the "Westfield Flour and Grist Mill" in the village on the site of the old one originally built by John McMahen.

When the War of 1812 broke out, practically every able-bodied man rushed to enlist. Not so James McClurg. There seems to have been quite a lot of feeling against him for that, when he left town, though why anyone would accuse an Irishman of either being afraid to fight or not wanting to fight England is not recorded in the pages of history. The fact of the matter is, he returned to Pittsburg - where he went into the Foundry business once again with his family, manufacturing cannon for the United States Government. These are believed to have been the first ever made in this country. Being the financier he was, he must have made money on the deal, but it also must have been much less expensive for the government to buy cannon here than to import them from France, where most of the best ones were made at that time.
One wonders if his had a "pet name" on a brass plate on the muzzle, like the ones in the museum at the Saratoga Battlefield.

At the first Westfield town meeting on April 7, 1829, James McClurg was elected Pound Master. From 1830, for seven years, school classes were held in the basement of the Presbyterian Church, then, on May 5, 1837, the Westfield Academy was chartered by the State Legislature, with the name of James McClurg on the list of the first Trustees.

Let's go back to 1817, the year his daughter Julia was born. That was when he first began to plan his house. Although a workday was from daybreak to dark, it took a year and a half to complete it. There seems to be some question as to whether or not he burned the lime, made and baked the bricks, got timber and prepared the wood for finishing the interior himself, or imported all of it from Pittsburg. According to an article presented at a meeting of the Historical Society in 1916 by William James Moore, his grandson, he did do the preliminary work himself. However, what was imported, came up-river to Mayville by boat, then to Westfield over the Portage Trail. All the time he was assembling his materials, his friends and enemies were laughing at him. With log cabins still the standard dwelling, why go to all this expense for such a pretentious piece of architecture? James McClurg was being downright foolish, that was all. Importing skilled bricklayers and carpenters and paying them fifty cents a day? foolish, so they called it "McClurg's Folly."

As they watched it grow, this "object of curiosity, admiration and derision," one wonders if perhaps they weren't rather proud that the builder had faith enough in this young, raw community to build here a house of and for the future. From a letter written by William H. Seward to his wife on September 22, 1836, we get this description: "It is a Colonial Mansion with two-storied pillars and porch on the front, sixteen rooms with twelve-foot ceilings and hardwood floors." Seward was renting the house at that time, while his own was being built, but as to why the McClurges were not in residence I can find no record. Not content with the building itself, James sent for rare trees and shrubs, Lombardy Poplars and shrubs trimmed in ornamental shapes gracing the grounds for many years. He piped water from springs half a mile away for a fountain and gold fish pond, and had deer roaming loose.

In 1819, when Catherine was born, the house was completed. Two years later Martha gave birth to a son, whom they named James. The brick Colonial Mansion, patterned after his father's home in Pittsburg, remained the same until Catherine married an Irish Count named Moore, at which time the front was rebuilt to resemble an Irish Castle. There was feeling in the town at the time that Count Moore was not really one. In fact, he was referred to as "The Count of No Account" by the local people.

The McClurges and Moores kept to themselves almost entirely, associating with very few of the townspeople. Perhaps that is the reason there is so little material available about them. Apparently, as James grew older, he became very eccentric. There is a story handed down from father to daughter that he kept his second wife (Martha died in 1842) locked up in an upstairs room. She used to call out a window for help when anyone walked by, and children were afraid to pass the house on their way to school.

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After the death of James McClurg in 1872, Catherine and her son William, who was born in 1852, lived in the old home. What happened to the Count doesn't seem to be known. Catherine died in 1908, when Will was fifty-six.

Will's first wife was a Miss Moore from Fredonia. She came from South Carolina after the close of the Civil War, and was no relation. His second wife was Helen S. Sutton of Pittsburg, who lived until 1915. Will lived on alone in the house, cared for by the maid Helen had brought with her, until his death in 1938. He willed the house and grounds to the village of Westfield, and his money to the YWCA.

Today, thirteen years later, we have a restored house, practically as good as the day it was built, a most appropriate site for the History Center of Chautauqua County.

8/4/1951, ARTHUR S. TENNANT.

This paper was prepared, and read at the Midsummer meeting of the Chautauqua County Historical Society at the Presbyterian Church, Westfield...August 4, 1951. cbs.