City of Jamestown, New York

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PRESENTATION TO CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY MEETING APRIL 22, 1995
BY B. DOLORES THOMPSON, CITY OF JAMESTOWN HISTORIAN

GOV. REUBEN E. FENTON, THE FENTON MANSION, AND THE FENTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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It is appropriate to begin my remarks today with a brief biography of Gov. Reuben E. Fenton. He was born July 4, 1819 near Frewsburg, NY. He attended local schools as a youth and continued his higher education at schools in Fredonia, NY and in Ohio. He left school to return to Frewsburg to assist his father with the family business which was failing. His entreprenurial skills and business acumen were successful in turning the business into a successful enterprise, earning the Governor a fortune.

He began his political career in 1846 when he was elected to the County Board of Supervisors at the age of 27. He remained on the Board until his election to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1852. In Washington, he became acquainted with others who were not satisfied with the existing political parties and, in association with them, he bacame a founding member of the present day Republican Party. He was a personal friend of Abraham Lincoln.

As a national political move, Gov. Fenton ran for governor of New York State in 1864, was elected, and served two - two-year terms in that office, from 1865 to 1869. He was then elected to the U. S. Senate where he served until 1875, retiring to spend time with his family at their recently constructed mansion in Jamestown. In 1878, he was appointed by Pres. Hayes to the U. S. Monetary Commission, traveling to Europe for numerous conferences.

He returned to private life, became a director and then president of the First

National Bank. He died at his desk at the bank on August 25, 1885, aged 66 years.

Gov. Fenton was married twice. His first wife, Jane Frew of the Frew family of Frewsburg, died at the age of 21 in childbirth. Their daughter, Jane, was raised by her grandparents and in later life moved west. Fenton descendants have apparently lost contact with any descendants from that first marriage. Gov. Fenton married again several years later, Elizabeth Scudder. They had three children: Josephine, who married Frank Gifford, a local banker; Jeannette, who was married first to Niven Hegeman of New York City and then to Albert Gilbert, a local entrepreneur; Reuben Earle, who was active in business enterprises in the community.

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Gov. Fenton made his fortune early in life in the lumbering business in Frewsburg and maintained his home there for many years. In 1863, he commissioned Aaron Hall, a well-known local architect, to design and construct the Italian Villa style building (with Tuscan Tower) we now call the Fenton Mansion, situated atop a small hill. For many years the property was known as Walnut Grove. Following the Governor's death, his widow , Elizabeth, lived in the house until her death in 1901. During the years the family lived in the Mansion, many prominent persons were visitors and even house guests. The Governor was still a political figure of influence and among his visitors were Horace Greeley, Generals Sherman and Sheridan (of the Civil War), and President McKinley. Mrs. Fenton and both daughters were strong supporters of the suffrage movement and Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were house guests during their visits to the area.

The Mansion served as the site for the reception of Josephine and her bridegroom, Frank Gifford, following their marriage. The Fenton archives contain a detailed account of the decorations of the drawingroom and the lady guests' attire. It would have been one of THE social events of the year, attended by every prominent person in Jamestown.

The Mansion was placed on the National Register of Historic Places on October 18, 1972, due to its historical and architectural significance.

Following Elizabeth Scudder Fenton's death, the Mansion became the property of the daughters, Josephine and Jeannette. During the ensuing years, records indicate there was a live-in caretaker at least part of that time. The daughters also owned the surrounding land and a second home in which Jeannette and Albert Gilbert lived. A buyer for the property was not readily available.

In 1912, the Chautauqua County Veterans' Union, a consortium of the county's veterans organizations, approached the Chautauqua County Board of Supervisors. They proposed that the county purchase the property and establish a Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Park, with the buildings being used as museums for war relics and meetings of the various groups. The proposal was quite fitting, as the Governor had acquired the nickname "The Soldiers Friend" during the Civil War due to the many kindnesses and assistance he gave to the soldiers and their families. The proposal was discussed, but no concrete action was ever taken by the Supervisors.

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George Lindstrom, a Jamestown member of the Board of Supervisors, pursued the idea even though he had moved from the area and relocated in Lakewood, Ohio. In 1915, he began writing to the City of Jamestown and gained the support of most of the city's organizations and of most of the prominent citizens. Finally, the Park and Planning Commission sent a report, dated January 6, 1919, to the Common Council of Jamestown recommending the purchase of the property known as Walnut Grove as a memorial park to soldiers and sailors. The report was signed by Mayor Samuel A. Carlson; Charles M. Dow, president of the National Chautauqua County Bank and a member of the New York State Parks Commission; Frederick P. Hall, editor of the Jamestown Evening Journal; Mrs. G. A. Haynes; Rovillus R. Rogers, former superintendent of the Jamestown Public Schools; Robert K. Beech, manager and publisher of the Jamestown Morning Post; and Edgar P. Putnam.

The Common Council accepted the report and voted to purchase the property pending the vote by city residents on a bond resolution to be held at a special election February 3, 1919. The bond resolution was prepared by the Corporation Counsel, Robert H.

Jackson, who was appointed to the United States Supreme Court by Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1937.

The bond resolution was approved by the citizens and on March 11, 1919 the city purchased the property for $35,000, $25,000 for the Fenton Mansion and $10,000 for the Gilbert house and property, all of which totaled 3.37 acres. The bond was to be repaid at the rate of $3,500 for the next ten years. (There is nothing said about interest on the bond.)

During the next years, many veterans organizations shared the rooms of the Mansion. The Jamestown Chapter, DAR also occupied a room even though there was considerable controversy over their right to be in the building. The city stored spring-flowering bulbs in the basement for many summers in the space now occupied by the Italian Room. The Grand Army of the Republic had its official national headquarters on the second floor. Cora Gillis was secretary for many years and when the last Union veteran died, Albert Woolson of Duluth, aged 109 years, all the records were sent to Washington, D. C. to the National Archives. Woolson died August 2, 1956.

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As time went on, the veterans organizations decided to leave the Mansion and acquire a building of their own, leaving room for other organizations. The local Selective Service had its offices in the building during the Second World War and later. In 1962, as plans were completed for the Washington Street Bridge and changes were made, the City Health Department, which had been occupying the second floor of the Public Market, moved into the entire first floor of the Mansion. At this time, also, it became apparent that the Mansion needed many repairs and the cost of its upkeep was becoming a burden to the city. This plus the fact that the road between the Washington Street Bridge and Foote Avenue was cutting through the front lawn of the Mansion prompted a number of persons to call for the demolition of the Fenton Mansion. Equally vocal were many citizens who felt that the Mansion should be saved and that another purpose could be found for the nearly one hundred year old structure. Mayor William D. Whitehead appointed a committee to assess a new use for the Mansion.

Serving with Stanley A. Weeks, Chairman, were: Michael Hjalmarson, Ernest D. Leet, John P. Sinclair, Warren P. Howard, Edgar Olson, Mary W. Torrance, Helen G. McMahon, Arthur A. Wellman, Ernest J. Muzzy, and Jennie Vimmerstedt. Their report is dated August 7, 1962. It called for the establishment of a museum and library to house the artifacts, archival records, and genealogical records of Jamestown and its citizens. It also strongly recommended that a historical society be formed to carry out the work of the musuem and library, which were to be housed in the Fenton Mansion.

The report was accepted and adopted, and plans were soon underway to implement the report.

The Fenton Historical Society became official on May 22, 1963 with the adoption of a constitution, by-laws, and the election of officers. The Society was granted a charter as an educational institution on May 22, 1964 by the New York State Board of Regents. In addition to the above named committee members, early officers, directors, and committee workers included John D. Crissey, DeForest W. Peterson, Helena Stonehouse, William R. Reynolds, Jr., C. Malcolm Nichols, Daniel F. Lincoln, Harry Rose, Harry Burgeson, Harry Stone, Sheldon Myregaard, Sybill M. McFadden, and Maryon Ingham. Enda Ingham was appointed the genealogist.

The museum and library formally opened in July 1967. Many artifacts had been acquired and catalogued and exhibits of them begun. The library had acquired old newspapers collections, journals, ledgers, and other archival materials from the Prendergast Library. The contract between the Historical Society and the City of Jamestown stipulated that the city would maintain the grounds and the building, and provide all utilities and a custodian. The Society would pay no rent and would be responsible for all exhibits, rooms, and materials collected. The Historical Society has assumed responsibility for some of the original stipulations.

I now invite you to tour the Mansion.

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