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JAMES McMAHAN AND PIONEER DAYS IN NORTHERN CHAUTAUQUA

Two hundred and seventy-two years ago (1663) was the first year that any attempt was made to define the lines of the province of New York, as distinguished from other lands held by Plymouth Company of England under grant from the King. In that year the Plymouth Company granted to the Duke of York the Province of New York, and that name was derived from the name of the Grantee. From that date on up to the date of the Revolutionary War the entire province was deeply involved in the French, English and Indian War; the Indian tribes being continuously baffled as to whether they should join with each other in defense of their territory against exploitation; or whether each tribe should defend its own particular territory against the explorers; or whether they should join with the French in opposing the English; or join with the English in opposing the French. The net result of the tribal bewilderment was that cooperative effort among the tribes was abandoned; some joined the British and some joined with the French, and many serious and brutal massacres resulted. The continuous battling of these forces made the purchase and settlement of the lands west of the Catskills and the Hudson River and north of Albany in the province and state of New York most impractical. However; those most obsessed with the spirit of adventure and colonization traveled up the Hudson and westward in the Mohawk Valley and Finger Lakes regions, and gradually settled in those parts of the province and state between the years 1760 (that being the time of termination of the French and Indian War) and 1800. The western part of New York State continued to be considered of comparatively small value, and up to and including the year 1781, when the land west of a line drawn north and south through Seneca Lake was ceded to the United States in payment of war debts; the obligations of the state to the government arising out of the Revolutionary War. Between the years 1781 and 1786 the State of New York in some manner acquired the right from the Federal Government to the western part of the state, and the right to transfer that section or any part of it as they might see fit. In 1786 the state legislature ceded to the state of Massachusetts all the lands west of the Seneca Lake line except the lands which the federal government had required said state to set aside for the use of the Indian tribes. The land reserved to the Indians in that section, according to the best authorities which I have been able to find, including about 1/7 of the territory. In 1791 Massachusetts sold by deed to Robert Morris all of the western part of the state except the Indian territory and two townships which were reserved by the state of Massachusetts and sold to Phelps and Gorman. In the same year Robert Morris was successful in obtaining the transfer of the Phelps and Gorman townships. On May 11, 1791 the Holland Land Company purchased from Robert Morris four tracts of land consisting of 800,000 acres each. The first three tracts were purchased at $210,000, and the fourth tract was purchased for $50,000, making a total purchase price of $260,000 or more than $.08 per acre for the entire tract west of the Genesee River in New York State. When it is considered that this purchase was less than 150 years ago, the figures are certainly startling.

In 1797 the Trustees of the Holland Land Company were directed by the State of New York to sell their property within seven years to citizens of the United States, but the title of the Land Company was not confirmed by the State of New York until the year 1801, there being some controversy as to that title on behalf of a man by

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the name of Townsend represented at that time by Aaron Burr as his Attorney. The difficulties on the title were ironed out and the title confirmed by Governor Morris in that year.

In the years 1793 to 1796 inclusive the Holland Land Company made extensive surveys of their purchase and James McMahan and Amos Sottle were connected with the work in that survey. In the year 1796 Amos Sottle erected a cabin near the mouth of the creek and in what is now the town of Hanover but he did not purchase the land on which the cabin was erected and he never attempted in any way to make a settlement, and neither did he clear any of the land surrounding his cabin. Subsequently he left the county for the years 1801, 1802 and 1803, returning in the year 1804. Whether or not he purchased land after his return is not material as to the question of settlement. The first purchase of land for purpose of settlement was made in 1801 by John McMahan almost immediately after the confirmation of the title of the Land Company, and immediately thereafter James McMahan made his purchase. John McMahan bought 22,000 acres in what is now the Town of Ripley, and James McMahan bought 4000 acres lying within the township of Westfield, the easterly line of the James McMahan purchase being the cross-roads in Westfield west of Chautauqua Creek about one-third of a mile. In the early spring of 1802 James McMahan brought his wife and two-year old son from northeast of Harrisburg in Pennsylvania to this county and built a cabin and cleared ten acres of land on what is now the Hemenway farm on the south side of the West Main Road in Westfield located about one mile west of the business center. This ten-acre tract was the first land cleared in Chautauqua County for settlement.

I feel of course very proud of the fact that my ancestor was the first settler in Chautauqua County, one of my garden spots of the world, and I am also duly impressed by his foresight in erecting his cabin within one hundred yards of what is now U.S. Route 20, the great trans-continental automobile highway running from Boston, Massachusetts, to Portland, Oregon, there being no roads in Chautauqua County at that time to indicate where anyone should settle. The feeling of pride is to some extent offset by a feeling that he must have been practically insane with the spirit of adventure to bring his wife and two-year old boy into a section where, in 1795, one of his chain bearers on the survey had been killed and scalped by the Indians. To have left one of the most fertile valleys of Pennsylvania, about sixty miles north of Harrisburg, where the McMahan homestead is still maintained by descendants, and to have travelled all that distance on practically impassible roads to reach the lands which he had purchased certainly must have been an experience which would tax the nerve and strength of the most hearty pioneer. Incidentally the two-year old boy developed into another individual obsessed with the spirit of adventure, and would up his career with an attack of Yellow Fever contracted in New Orleans, Louisiana, in 1820. I never could thoroughly understand the antics of my ancestors until I recently learned that a great uncle of his, a Scotch-Irishman, was the second President of the first French republic, he having chosen the life of a soldier of fortune and enlisted in the service of France at that time. A descendant of his was General McMahan who served in the World War in the armies of France. In my individual case I have not at any time been obsessed with the spirit of adventure of my ancestors, and have been willing personally to abide

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by the good judgment of the first settler and continue to reside in good old Chautauqua County.

The process of settlement of Chautauqua County was very slow, and it has been handed down to me as a matter of history that there was no forage for horses in the county until harvest season of 1804 except what had been raised on the ten-acre clearing of James McMahan. It is easy to enumerate the first settlers from 1802 to 1806 as follows: 1802, James McMahan, Edward McHenry, John McMahan, and Daniel Kincaid; in 1803 Arthur Bell, Christopher Dull, James Montgomery and Andrew Straub; in 1804 Jacob George and Laughlin McNeill; in 1805 George Whitehall; in 1806 David Eason, Matthew McClintock and Low Miniger being all of the settlers who came here in the five-year period mentioned. After 1806 the settlement was rather rapid up to the time of the war of 1812.

I will now revert to the subdivision of New York as it progressed from 1802 to 1929. In 1802 all the territory west of the Genesee River comprised Genesee County, and it was divided in four townships. The Town of Batavia included the county of Chautauqua. In 1804 the Town of Chautauqua (being all of the county) was first formed. In 1808 the County of Chautauqua was formed and first recognized as a county by the legislature. From 1808 to 1829 the townships of Ripley and Portland included the township of Westfield, and Westfield was formed in that year from those two townships, and consisted of 47 square miles or 30,000 acres of land. The lines of our township have not been changed since that date. From 1806 to the period of enlistment in the war of 1812 the population increased so rapidly that a Chautauqua County regiment was formed consisting of three hundred volunteers, including the entire military strength of the county. With the enlistment of these men their families were deprived of the workers at home and the women, although they did their best, could not cultivate enough of the cleared land to raise sufficient forage for the livestock. Each settler lost a substantial portion of his livestock during the period of his service, either by starvation for lack of food or by reason of the necessity of slaughtering the cattle for food for their families. Also neglect of their cleared land for the period of the war constituted an added hardship on their return from the service.

One of the early settlers, Edward McHenry, was the father of John McHenry, the first white child born in Chautauqua County. He was born at the tavern built by his father in 1802 at the crossroads west of the village of Westfield. Edward McHenry was drowned in Lake Erie on a trip from Barcelona to Presque Isle, which trip was being made for the purpose of obtaining provisions for his tavern. His body was never found. His widow carried on at the tavern for several years, and descendants of the second child of Edward McHenry, born in 1803, are now living in Chautauqua County. John McHenry lived to about the age of 65 years, and from the time of his boyhood he was continuously paraded at all fairs and public gatherings throughout the county as the first white child born in the county. He never married, and his habits of living, which resulted from too much wining and dining, made him appear to be older then he was, and those habits contributed largely to his physical breakdown and death.

To get back to the War of 1812, our Chautauqua County regiment acquitted itself with glory up to the time of the Battle of Blackrock in December, 1813. The

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British victory there was very complete, and the regiment was completely routed and scattered. Attempts were made to re-organize the regiment at Batavia, the City of Buffalo having been burned and being largely occupied by the British. The men of the Chautauqua County regiment, realizing the terrible plight in which their families had been left, deserted and returned on foot to their families. As promptly as headquarters could be communicated with the members of the regiment were listed as deserters, and late in the month of January, 1814 army officers, either three or five, were sent to Westfield with instructions to arrest each deserter. When they reached the tavern at four corners they found the men re-organizing a new company, and instead of making the arrests they turned in and aided in the re-organization, after which the new regiment returned to Buffalo and acquitted themselves with much honor in a second engagement with the British, which resulted in favor of our troops. The commissions of the officers were restored and some of them promoted and the charges of desertion were dropped. John McMahan emerged from the War of 1812 with the title of General and James McMahan with the title of Colonel. In 1814, just previous to the Battle of Lake Erie and when things looked very dismal to the early settlers along the south shores of the Lake the Government, fearing the British occupation of that territory, ordered John McMahan to burn his mill at the mouth of Chautauqua Creek. The mill was then well filled with flour and feed which had been ground for farmers and which had not been called for by them, and the burning of the mill under military orders resulted in the loss of much food, both for families of the pioneers and their livestock. Claims were filed, and due to the financial stringency which prevailed throughout the entire country these claims were never paid to John McMahan for the loss of his mill or to his customers for loss of their grain and feed until 1837, at which time they were paid the amount of their claims plus 2% simple interest.

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After the War 1812 the soldiers returned to their families and proceeded to build and repair their properties for the first great period of prosperity which this section enjoyed. The only source of income came from log rolling and burning of the timber, converting it into pot and pearl ashes. These pot and pearl ashes were shipped to Montreal until the Erie Canal was finished. They were taken by vessel from Barcelona and Dunkirk to Black Rock; by open boat to Schlosser Landing; by ox teams to Lewiston and by vessel to Cape Vincent; thence by rafts down the St. Lawrence to Montreal. Those engaged in the ashery business were John R. Coney, Portland, Mr. Brockway in Ripley, Alvin Williams in Westfield and Ashville, Guy Webster in Hanover, Herriot M. McGunnigle at Mayville, and Holbrook and Camp and Colville at Forestville. Records of pot and pearl ashes prior to 1820 are very meager, but from 1820 to 1825 pot ashes and pearl ashes sold at $128 per ton, and the prices of black salts were from $2.25 to $4.00 per hundred weight. The Montreal market for this product was of course to England. The only other source of income was the sale of certain hard wood lumber native to Chautauqua County which was floated to Pittsburg, oak bringing the highest price on the Pittsburg market. During this period notes between settlers were made payable in grain, lumber, cattle, salts and other commodities and they usually contained the words "at cash price." Barter of goods was the method of transacting all of the business deals. Most of the business of the county was for years done in the northern or Lake Town settlements, and maple sugar, furnished by the southern towns at prices as low as four and five cents per pound was shipped in large quantities by water in those years. The only white sugar

used by settlers was called loaf sugar, and it was purchased mainly by the tavern keepers for use with their liquors, and by physicians for the sweetening of medicines.

Then added to the difficulties of pioneers, the summer of 1816 must be especially mentioned. Corn was planted on the 6th of June in a snow storm, and the other months of the year are described as follows: January was mild, so much so as to render fires almost needless in a sitting room; the December preceding was very was cold; February was not very cold; March was cold and boisterous; during the first half, and the remainder was mild; April began warm and grew colder as the month advanced with snow and ice and winter temperature. In May buds and fruits were frosted and covered with ice a half inch in thickness. Corn was killed, and the fields were again and again replanted until deemed too late. Frost and ice and snow were common in June. Almost every green herb was killed, fruit nearly all destroyed; snow fell to the depth of three inches. July was accompanied by frost and ice, on the morning after the 4th ice formed to the thickness of several inches. Indian corn was killed, although some favorably situated fields escaped. In August ice was ½ inch in thickness. Indian corn which had survived was frozen so that most of it was cut down and dried for fodder. Almost every green thing was destroyed, and very little corn in the New York and middle states ripened. Farmers provided themselves, from the corn produced in 1815, with seed in the spring of 1817, which seed sold as high as $5 per bushel. After the middle of September ice was formed a quarter of an inch in thickness. October, November and December were regular winter months, and the mildest weather in the three months was December.

To add to the difficulties of our ancestors they were bothered continuously by wolves, so that beginning with the year 1815 the state offered $20 for the destruction of a full grown wolf, and $10 for a young wolf. This bounty reduced in 1820 to $5 and $2.50, and bounties were continuously paid up to the year 1835. Many of the settlers were able in the early years to collect from $200 to $500 in bounties.

Another difficulty which the settlers faced was the expense of transportation on imported goods up to the year 1825, when the Erie Canal was opened and the bridges were completed across the streams between Silver Creek and Buffalo; prior to that time the average cost of importation from the east was $6 per hundred weight, or $100 per ton.

The life of the pioneer can be best summarized in a letter from one of the pioneer mothers published in a Chautauqua County paper which read as follows: "The country around us was an entire wilderness, with here and there a small cabin, containing a small family. We were nearly all new beginners; and although we had to work almost day and night, we were not discouraged. There were many and serious trial in the beginning of this country, with those who settled amid the heavy timber, having nothing to depend upon for a living but their own industry. Such was our situation. However, we were blest with health and strength, and were able to accomplish all that was necessary to be done. Our husbands cleared the ground, and assisted each other in rolling the logs. We often went with them on these occasions, to assist in the way of cooking for the hands.

We had first rate times, just such as hard-laboring men and women can appreciate. We were not what would now be called fashionable cooks; we had no

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pound cakes, preserves, or jellies; but the substantials, prepared in plain, old-fashioned style. This is one reason why we were blessed with health; we had none of your dainties, knick-knacks, and 'fixings' that are worse than nothing. There are many diseases that we had never even heard of thirty or forty years ago, such as dyspepsia, neuralgia, and many others too tedious to mention. It was not fashionable then to be weakly. We could take our spinning wheels and walk two miles to a spinning frolic, do our day's work, and after a first-rate supper, join in some innocent amusement for the evening. We did not take particular pains to keep our hands white; we knew they were made to use for our advantage; therefore, we never thought of having hands just to look at. Each settler had to go and assist his neighbors ten or fifteen days, in order to get help in return in log-rolling time; this was the only way to get assistance.

I have thought proper to mention these matters that people now may know what the first settlers had to undergo. We, however, did not complain half as much as people do now. Our diet was plain; our clothing we manufactured ourselves; we lived independent, and were all on equality. I look back on those by-gone days with great interest. How the scene changed! Children of these same pioneers know nothing of hardship; they are spoiled by indulgence, and are generally planning ways and means to live without work."

My connection with the family of James McMahan is mainly due to another ancestor, my grandfather, Austin Smith, who came to Fredonia from Lansing, Tompkins County, New York, in 1826 by canal and stage coach to assume the duties of Principal of the first Academy in Chautauqua County. James McMahan, wishing to give his daughter the advantages of an education at the Fredonia Academy, traded 300 acres of land in the heart of what is now the village of Westfield for a home in the village of Fredonia he studied law in the office of Crane & Mullett, and was admitted to the practice of law early in the year 1830, at which time he moved to Westfield and commenced the construction of the home in which three generations of my family have been born, and in which I now live. Our one-story brick office, located on the residential lot, has been continuously operated by four generations of the family as a law office since 1830.

This paper being devoted to pioneer days in Northern Chautauqua I will have to leave you on the threshold of a period of most interesting development of the complete economic transformation of the business of the county.

I thank you for this opportunity of passing on to you these items of historical interest, most of which have heretofore been recorded, but some of which have been handed down to me by my parents and grandparents. My grandfather, Austin Smith, lived to the age of one hundred years and seven months, and I had the privilege of living with him continuously. He retained his faculties almost to the last and was able to hand down to me many of these items of interest.

Again I thank you,

Arthur S. Tennant

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