WILLIAM HENRY SEWARD

Paper written by Miss Caroline Betts for the Chautauqua County Historical Society at Westfield, N.Y.
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This was a time to be born. The cannon sound of the Revolution hardly ceased rolling when the advance rumblings of the Civil War could, by some, be faintly heard.

The primeval forest stretched from coast to coast. The Indians were still a force on all sides. Wolves were common and deer were everywhere and caught extensively for meat.

Veterans of the Revolution still carried the guns they had used in the war. They remembered words of Samuel Adams and Thomas Paine and the deeds of George Washington. They were still chuckling over the stories of Benjamin Franklin.

In the log cabins our earliest inventors were tinkering with hand wrought nails and moving toward engines, toward steamboats soon to run on the Hudson and toward better ways of turning wheels faster.

Villages were growing up everywhere. Colorful coaches and wagons crowded the roadways. Oxen and horses and mules and men were all on the move. Our great country was getting its roots nourished in a new freedom.

James and John McMahan were in this area surveying and it was in 1801 that they purchased vast areas of land with the idea of returning the following year with their families to make the first settlement in Chautauqua County.

Voltaire has said that he who serves his country well has no need for ancestors. However, there can be no serious objection to them if they be sober-minded and do not embarass their offspring. So far as is known, there was nothing in the lives of William
William Seward's ancestors that calls for either boasting or concealment. They came of good, plain stock and stood well in the communities in which they lived.

Seward's father, Samuel Seward was a physician by profession, but by practice he was a farmer, a merchant, a politician, a magistrate and for seventeen years, a county judge. He also represented his county in the state government. This man of many vocations prospered financially and grew in the esteem of his neighbors. Dr. Seward's wife, Mary Jennings, had merely the advantages offered by the country schools.

William Henry Seward was born in Florida, Orange County, New York, May 16, 1801 - one hundred sixty years ago. He was the fourth of six children. His native village had about a dozen houses. His earliest vivid recollections were of stories about witches that duelt at night in the attic of the little country schoolhouse and that during the daytime haunted the wooded cliff just above it. He remembered that his father once placed him on the counter of the store to give a recitation and that when a pleased listener asked the child which one of his father's many callings he intended to adopt, William replied that he expected to be a justice of the peace.

At the age of nine he was sent to an academy in the neighboring village where he lived with two cousins. Here he began to study Latin. Although he had red hair he had none of the qualities which one might think goes with red hair. He was not a robust child but somewhat small and timid. His school mates were disappointed when they found that he was not a fighter. Nor would he even join them in trying to shut the teacher out of the school house on
Christmas for not giving them a holiday.

It was decided that William was to be the son favored with a liberal education because he was the frailest. Recalling his school days, later, William said that his studies began at five in the morning and closed at nine at night. William was so overloaded with difficult tasks in Latin that he rebelled and threw away his books. He reformed, however, when his father appealed to his ambition by telling him that he might become a great lawyer if he studied hard. Much careful work was crowded into the six years so when a little over fifteen years of age he was about midway in the curriculum of a first class college.

He entered Union College as a sophomore. William Henry was then a thin, pale, undersized youth and looked even younger than he was. His red hair, sandy complexion, ill-fitting homespun clothes made him the object of merriment. His clothes were soon laid aside for a new suit made by the most approved tailor. This caused him to go in debt, for Dr. Seward gave him a scant allowance, believing that what was good enough for the rural village would do for the college town. These debts led to trouble that imperiled his career. The Senior year at college began but the tailor's bills had not been paid. Dr. Seward refused to settle the account and William could not while remaining a student.

The incident became so disagreeable that he secretly set off for Georgia to take over as head of an Academy with a salary of $800 a year. When his parents learned of his whereabouts they both begged him to return home. After successfully opening the school, he started back to his home in New York State.

For the remainder of that year he read law in an attorney's
office and turned his fees over to pay the tailor's bill. The stern father merely tolerated him when he did right and was unrelenting when anything went wrong. He returned to college and was graduated from Union.

Following this, he continued his studies in law in New York City. In October, 1822, Seward went to Utica to take his examination for admission to practice law. There was but one question he did not know.

Now he was ready to start out on his own. His father gave him $50 as a starter with the final word, "I expect you'll be back all too soon." He headed westward to find the best place in which to settle. Auburn attracted him because it was there that Miss Frances Miller, a friend of his sister, lived. Elijah Miller offered young Seward $500 a year as a partner in law. It seemed a wise choice in every respect. In his first year's practice, he gained experience and confidence. He attended social and political gatherings. He joined the militia and in every proper way made himself useful and prominent. Instead of writing to his father for more money, he returned that which he had borrowed.

Most important of all his acts at this time was his marriage in October, 1824 to Frances Miller. She had an extraordinary education and was worthy to be the guiding star of a good man's life. Her father was a widower in good financial circumstances. It was agreed that the young couple should live with him. Seward had a very promising start in life and he was just the man to pick his way rapidly rather than to hew it slowly. He was wise enough to act on the principle that one should show oneself to be a good citizen before expecting to obtain the confidence and favor of good citizens.
It was in 1824 when Seward was 23 years old that he began to take a prominent part in politics of his county, uniting with the opponents of the Republican party. De Witt Clinton was the ablest and most picturesque statesman of this time and he was sure to excite the sympathies of a man of Seward's age and impulses aims. Seward made an address at the Republican convention and his ideas and expressions attracted public attention.

Just as Westfield had welcomed Lafayette in 1825, so Auburn shared in the glory of welcoming the Marquis. William Henry was one of the committee and with the mayor had the honor of accompanying Lafayette from Auburn to Syracuse. A few years later while touring in Europe with his father, Lafayette extended to Seward a cordial invitation to call at his Paris home and at his country home at La Grange.

In 1828 Seward decided to enlist in the Anti-Masonic movement which suited his temperament and promised to satisfy his political ambition. He was a delegate to the State convention and to the National convention in 1830 and then he was a full-fledged politician. He had then become a marked success and was elected a member of the senate minority party. After the first year he had not only stood foremost among his Anti-Masonic colleagues but also ranked with the five or six ablest men in the state legislature.

When the Whig party was formed, following the decrease in power of the Anti-Masonic party, Seward was nominated as governor. Losing the vote, he rejoiced that he was free from the wearying and "unprofitable life" he had been leading at Albany and hoped that he could remain at home for a long time with his family.

The Holland Land Company had purchased about 3½ million acres of land from Robert Morris for the purpose of selling or leasing
it on long credit to settlers. Because of financial and hostile legislation the company decided to divide and sell its vast state. Some wealthy residents of Batavia made an agreement for the purchase of large tract lying within Chautauqua County. The settlers became much excited when they heard that the purchasers intended to raise the price of land on contracts which had not been promptly fulfilled. Convinced that they had been wronged, hundreds of the settlers took matters in their own hands and destroyed the land office and many of the records of the Land Company at Mayville, where Judge Peacock was the agent.

It was at this point that Seward was asked to accept the agency of the new company, to undertake the task of averting other calamities and to restore quiet and harmony between the settlers and the land lords. The kind, business like methods of Mr. Seward made it plain that he sought merely what was right. He reported to the main office at Batavia for instructions. Here he remained three weeks, employed a large force of clerks to obtain copies of the deeds and papers which had been destroyed during the raid on the Mayville office two months previous.

Mr. Seward was thirty five years of age at this time but his slender frame, smooth-shaven face, clear blue eyes, red hair, quick active movements and merry laugh gave him rather a boyish appearance.

It is interesting to read of his experiences as recorded in his own letters to his wife, to Mr. Thurlow Weed, his best friend, and to others.

Westfield, July 24, 1836

"We had a rainy morning to leave Buffalo on Thursday, great confusion..."
on getting on board the steamboat.

We landed in the rain at Dunkirk at two o'clock on Thursday. Dunkirk "is to be" a place of great importance, but it is now a miserable one. A half-hour's ride brought us to Fredonia, a very pretty village. As soon as we arrived we were visited by several citizens who were desirous to have the location of my office in their village. We left the next morning with the most favorable impression of the beauty of the village and the enterprise and hospitality of the people."

Parson Smith had married Wm Seward and Frances Miller in Auburn and later had moved west to Fredonia. While Seward was stopping here he looked up the minister and his family. The two young men were immediately attracted to one another and a friendship speedily developed that lasted all through life.

"From Fredonia to Westfield was fourteen miles and we passed over a great thoroughfare within two to four miles of the lake shore. Certainly my eyes never rested upon a finer country. We found Westfield still more beautiful than Fredonia. It is one mile and a half from Portland Harbor and the lake may be seen from any part of the village. I found it much preferable to Fredonia for the location of the land office.

At four o'clock on Friday we passed over to Mayville, the county town and the location of the old office. It lies at the head of Chautauqua Lake and contains scarcely more than fifty houses, a tavern, stores, a good courthouse, clerk's office and the ruins of the land office.

My observations of Mayville resulted in my conviction that it would be an unprofitable place for the sale of land. So I decided to return to Westfield. It was a sad blow to Mayville
for the land office was the principal source of its importance and business."

William Seward set up his residence and office at the Westfield House.

Westfield, Sept. 3, 1836

"I have an unoccupied hour on a rainy morning before the time that the good people of Chautauqua are accustomed to reach the office.

I found matters tranquil and prosperous here. I have already had many evidences that my residence among the good people is regarded with kindness. Payments began to be made at first in cautious driblets and afterwards larger and faster than anticipated. The land office became as popular as it had been unpopular and was thronged with friendly visitors."

Westfield, Sept. 10, 1836

To Mrs. Seward

"I have learned that I am to enjoy little of that rest that I have anticipated. From seven and often from six in the morning, until eight or nine or ten o'clock in the evening we are constantly transacting business in a crowd. Our business is simple and it involves no intricate study. If you could see me among the people here, you would almost suppose I had always lived happily among them."

Mr. Seward had tired of the confusion of the tavern and leased the McClurg Mansion from James McClurg.

Westfield, Sept. 22, 1836

To Mrs. Seward

"It would do your heart good to see me seated at my own table in "my own hired house," with my own books and papers, and my hired
family, around me. In truth, I became very lonely and uncomfortable at the tavern. Yesterday morning I notified Sarah Scott that I could wait no longer and I began to move. My wardrobe was soon removed from the trunks; my paper deposited in the hall. I begged of Mr. Gale a loaf of bread and a bottle of rum. Sarah found the pork barrel and pulled some green corn in the garden, and in an hour I was having dinner with no one to disturb me.

I know you will be delighted with the house when you come to see it in the summer. It stands in the center of grounds of several acres, ornamented with trees and shrubbery. It has a double piazza in front of the center or main building and is two stories high. The arrangement of the rooms is this: In the center, a hall about twenty feet wide. off this, in the rear, an octagon parlor which opens into the shrubbery in the garden. There are five spacious bedrooms above. There are cellars, out-houses, smoke-house, garden, orchard, etc; everything well contrived. The flowers and the fruit hang around me in profusion and the retirement of my dwelling invites me to it every hour I have freedom."

Oct. 4, 1836

"During the fine weather in September, I was cheerful, for I had an abundance of occupation. Money and bonds and mortgages crowded in upon me faster than I could dispose of them."

Oct. 10, 1836

"There is now about 1/3 of the purchase money paid. I am living quietly and pleasantly here."

Oct. 12, 1836

Mr. Seward made a trip through the principal townships of the County for the purpose of looking at the lands of the Holland Purchase as well as meeting and getting acquainted with the people,
Dec. 19, 1836

Mr. Seward tells about his Thanksgiving Dinner of fine roasted turkey and venison steak. His guests were all of his clerks (10) and the wife of one.

He attended church in the Presbyterian church with Episcopal clergyman preaching. Dinner at 4 P.M.

Dec. 24, 1836

"Had 6 guests for dinner on Christmas Eve including Presbyterian and Episcopal clergymen. Attended Episcopal church in evening - decorated and illuminated. Throng crowded in every aisle and nook."

Jan. 8, 1837

"The 'day of grace' has passed. People came singly, and in pairs, by twenties, fifties and hundreds, on foot and on horseback, multitudes with money and many without any. They left me prostrated by absolute physical exhaustion. But you must know the results. One-half of the Holland Co. estate is settled and arranged, more than 80,000 A. of land conveyed, almost ½ of entire debt paid."

March 7, 1837

"My brother, Jennings, came here on Thursday last and made me a very gratifying visit. I had been anticipating his arrival for I have matured a plan equally advantageous for both of us. It would release me from my present business and would restore his power in the right direction. I asked him to come with his family and grow up with the business so as not to produce alarm by a sudden change. He will come as my chief assistant
March 26, 1837

"I received this morning the sacraments of baptism and the communion. I felt that it was my duty and I had too long postponed it."

It was about this time that Mr. Seward gave money for the first organ that the Episcopal church had.

In the July of 1837 Mr. Seward brought his family to the Mansion House. He took them to see various points of interest in Fredonia, Dunkirk, Mayville and a delightful boat trip to Jamestown. He really enjoyed the time that his family spent with him. He wrote -- "I am at ease."

It was also in July 1837 that he was asked to deliver the commencement address at the Westfield Academy. Parents, relatives and friends thronged to the school and there was unusual activity in the little village. Mr. Seward described the effects of too hasty and careless training of the citizens called to deal with public affairs. "Our children and youth are generally dismissed from school at the very period when their education has only fairly commenced." He tried to emphasize the importance of female education. (which had hardly begun to receive popular attention) He stated that women were equally qualified and equally entitled to the happiness derived. "They are the natural guardians of the young as the Creator has given them a greater portion of responsibility to the youth."

His speech created much discussion among the people of the County.
July 29, 1838

Mr. Seward acknowledged the fine article which Horace Greeley had printed in the Fredonia Censor. "No man could believe that this was written by anybody but myself. Its temper, manner, and the very facts used seem to be exclusively mine own."

In August the Whig Convention met and nominated Seward for Governor.

As election time drew near the Democrats used large hand bills--"Wm. H. Seward, the agent of the U.S. Bank and Holland Land Speculator."

The Whigs used --- "Seward, the poor man's Friend."

Chautauqua County gave him a 2200 majority, in his election for the governorship.

During the winter of 1839 - 1840 under the direction of Wm. Seward, the Farnsworth house on N. Portage was remodeled into the present style and Benjamin J. Seward lived there until his (D.J.) sudden death in 1841. Then it was purchased by G.W. Patterson when, by W. Seward's request, he took up the work as land agent.

After his election as Governor, Mr. Seward must have visited Westfield. Many people came to welcome him and he addressed them in the "Long Room" of the Westfield House.

"I don't wish to come to you in the capacity of Governor of New York. I desire only to remember that I have been your neighbor and fellow citizen. I pray you will be assured that wherever my future lot shall be cast, I shall cherish unfailing gratitude for your friendship and an ardent desire for your prosperity and happiness."

one of the founders of Westfield Republicans < 1855
Mrs. Hattie Saigeon who lives in Westfield on Route 5 told me that her grandfather, John Bourne, worked for William and Benjamin Seward and also Mr. Patterson. Mr. Bourne had a bed in the land office and slept there at night. He was a very trust worthy man as he also carried the money to the bank at Silver Creek, driving a team of very fast horses. Mr. Bourne worked for them until he married and purchased the farm where Mrs. Saigeon lives today. A daughter of Mr. Bourne's was tutored with Benjamin Seward's son who was sick or perhaps crippled. Mrs. Saigeon has two books which William Seward gave her grandfather from Benjamin's library.

Mr. Seward corresponded regularly with Mr. Patterson - even a letter from Washington asking to be sent two firkins of "good Chautauqua County butter".

Seward accepted his victory in the state very seriously. He realized that there were to be great responsibilities in shaping and directing a policy of the majority party in the highest office of the state.

When William Seward and Thurlow Weed were out of power, they saw and denounced the evils of the spoil system but when they secured control of the government they were about as grasping and severe as Democrats before them had been. While in college Seward had prepared an essay to show that the Erie Canal could never be completed or, if it should be, it would ruin the state. When it was completed in 1825 and he realized the value of such a waterway, Seward gave such support to internal improvements, that many regarded him as Clinton's successor in this field. He backed the promotion of the railroad as a "new triumph".

At this time, the so called public schools did not attract the
children of the poorer classes, especially those of recent immigrants. Seward learned that as many as 30,000 were growing up in absolute illiteracy. He did not hesitate to recommend that schools be set up in which these children might be instructed by teachers speaking the same language as they did and professing the same faith. He won the good-will of the Catholics for advocating parochial schools but aroused the wrath of the Protestants. From this time on, it was an issue in national life destined to unending controversy - even to the present time.

In the autumn of 1840 William Henry was reelected Governor by the help of Thurlow Weed and Horace Greeley. Opposition to public education continued. Anti-rent disputes deepened. He helped establish the first state hospital for the mentally ill, then called a "lunatic asylum".

As 1842 drew to a close, he began to look forward to retirement. He had his taste of high office and it had been four years of rocky going, running this New York State. Seward felt that he was through with this political life forever and now he would go home to his family in Auburn. He was now forty years and broke (in debt 400,000 dollars to the Land Company proprietors) with a large family to support. He could turn to his private law practice. This he did but when he received $5 for settling a case, he decided that it didn't seem credible that he could have just retired from the governorship of New York state and yet be starting at the bottom. In time the sale of land in Chautauqua County brought him profit.

By 1846 he felt strong enough to take on the "whole world" and he was soon back in politics in full force. By 1849 Seward
was elected U.S. senator - not yet 48 years old. In the Senate, his was the dominant voice, the carrier - on of the great work started by Webster, Clay and Calhoun. Through him the spirit of John Quincy Adams breathed at the Capital. He took a leading part in the discussion of slavery after his reelection to the Senate in 1855. He was often referred to as a "seditious agitator and dangerous man."

Disappointed as William Henry was in not receiving the nomination for the Presidency in 1856 and again in 1860, no one traveled farther, nor campaigned more furiously for Lincoln than he. But people wondered if he would run the government when Lincoln took over as President. Many thought he had run it when serving as Senator. William Henry, himself, decided that way before Lincoln arrived in Washington. During the first month, it was hard for Seward to refrain from showing his natural political superiority. He felt that he was the "big man of the hour and of the national crises" and that nobody else could think things through as well as he could. He felt that his reputation was international. Seward firmly felt that Lincoln was no President. He was merely lanky and green and raw and full of "I reckons".

In a very short time, William Henry realized that he faced a man who meant to be President and who was President. Lincoln had his eye closely on his Secretary of State and he was convinced that the little fellow, Mr. Seward, was a "powerhouse" all to himself and needed only to have his wheels set going in the right direction and then he would be the most useful man in the Cabinet. Lincoln said that he could not get along without Seward and his counsel but that he did not control the President in any official
action. During the four years of conflict, it became Abe's custom to drop in every day or evening at Seward's place and talk over in great detail every event. As time went on, Seward became a loyal supporter and a very close friend of the Presidents. At the same time he discovered that his chief was a supreme politician. Had he not joined together in his Cabinet, the warring personalities which could have turned definitely against him? "He has a cunning that amounts to genius", wrote Seward about Lincoln. Here was the leadership of one and the support and counsel of the other, the attraction of two giants into a firm friendship. Seward was the only member of Lincoln's first cabinet who stood by him straight through and entered the second.

Seward filled his post as Secretary of State with efficiency, particularly in connection with the foreign relations of our country. He reorganized the diplomatic service and by his able dispatches and instructions furnished to representatives abroad retained the confidence of Europe which had been ready to grant recognition and support to the Confederacy.

In the spring of 1865 Mr. Seward was thrown from his carriage and his arm and jaw were fractured. While he was confined to his couch with these injuries, President Lincoln was murdered and on the same evening one of the conspirators gained access to the bed room of Seward, inflicting severe wounds with a knife in his face and neck and struck down his son, Frederick who came to his rescue. Mr. Hanson Risley of Fredonia became a very good friend of Seward's while he was in Washington. Mr. Risley was the first to hasten to Seward's bedside.

When he was able to carry on his official work, he sustained the reconstruction policy of President Johnson and thereby alienated the most powerful section of the Republican party and
subjected himself to better censure. Seward opposed the impeachment of the President in 1868 and supported Gen. Grant for presidency in the same year. Meanwhile in 1867, he had negotiated the purchase of Alaska from Russia as he felt that the nation which held the key of the western waters would hold the key to the world. We have read so often of the ridicule of the idea and the use of the term "Seward's Ice Box". How differently the United States looks at the situation today!

After Mr. Seward's retirement March 1, 69, he visited Alaska and felt justified about the great decision to enlarge our country by acquiring this land in the far north. Do you suppose that he ever dreamed that it might some day become our 49th state?

Mr. Seward was a wanderer and couldn't stay still. In fact he had seen more of the world than many a sea captain. Sometimes, the family and others referred to him as "Captain".

The Risley home in Fredonia became a second home after the death of his wife and daughter. When his health failed and the doctors ordered a trip around the world he felt he could not make the journey alone and he begged Mr. Risley for his daughters as companions. As an outcome of long years of close associations the older daughter took the Seward name and filled a daughter's place in the last years of his life.

He spent his last days at the Miller home in Auburn writing the story of his own life. On October 10, 1872 when his strength was gone and his sons were gathered about him, he uttered his last three words: "Love one another".
William Henry Seward had, in the course to fashion America, become a unique American himself, standing with a few other eminent men of our land at the pinnacle. Radical? Conservative? Revolutionary? Politician? Statesman? American? What was he? He was a man born for the state, ambitious, desirous of leading and to be loved and honored by the people and in return for which he would give great services to the people, the Government, human society - and he would do whatever and be whatever to make himself such a symbol.