

WILLIAM H. SEWARD, AGENT

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by

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WILLIAM H. SEWARD, AGENT

The story of William H. Seward, Agent, covers only the short period of five years but it embraces a vast amount of experience in which courage, ability and character were demonstrated.

To understand Seward's life in Chautauqua County, one must have a picture of the background of the man who came to an important position in Westfield while still a very young man. Born in Florida, Orange County, N. Y., May 16, 1801, he graduated at an early age from Union College at Schenectady and dove rapidly and successfully into the study and practice of law. A clear thinker and a ready speaker, he soon found himself in active politics. At twenty nine as a State Senator at Albany, his acquaintance with Thurlow Weed ripened into a friendship which was to exert a greater influence upon his life than any thing other than his love for his family. In 1833 he spent many months abroad adding to his already large store of culture and knowledge, and enjoying the beauties of most of Western Europe. This trip included a memorable visit to the home of Lafayette whom he had met when the French General was in this country in 1825. The next year brought him back into politics and his defeat as candidate for Governor. After a period of hard work in the legal profession, the Summer of 1835 found him again traveling but this time for three months throughout the Eastern part of our own country. It was this trip which brought him into contact with the slave trade, thereby strengthening the antipathy which he

already held for the evil which he was to fight for the next thirty years.

This then is a rather hasty sketch of the man who can best tell in his own words the story of his connection with the undertaking which brought him to our county. The following account is found in a memorandum written for his associates on August 27, 1836, and which I believe is hitherto unpublished:

"In the spring and summer of 1835 Messrs Trumbull Cary and Geo. W. Lay of Batavia made a parol agreement with the Holland Company by their general agent, John J. Vanderkemp, Esq., of Philadelphia, for the purchase of the remaining real and personal estate of that Company in the County of Chautauque. The terms of the purchase were that the purchasers should pay to the Company the amount of principal and interest due on the contracts then in life, and should pay for the land held under expired contracts the sum of three dollars per acre where the land lies in the counties on the shore of Lake Erie, and two dollars per acre where the land lies in the inland towns and that the purchasers should pay for the unsold lands at the same price as the lands held under expired contracts, to wit three dollars and two dollars per acre. The aggregate of debt in Contracts in force was as nearly as my memory serves me about \$650,000. The aggregate of the purchase money of the lands held under expired contracts was about one hundred and sixty thousand, and that of unsold lands about \$120,000. making the aggregate purchase money exceeding \$900,000. The advantages of the purchase were the following:

- 1st. A deduction of 15 per cent from the entire aggregate of purchase.
- 2d. A deduction of one year's interest on the whole purchase. The purchase relating to the property as the same stood on the first of January, 1835, and interest accruing only from the 1st of January, 1836.

3d. That the purchasers pay 5 per cent per annum interest while the debts draw interest at 7 per cent.

4th. The profit upon such of the lands as should revert (those held under expired contracts being supposed to be worth on an average (those purchased at \$3.) six dollars, (those purchased at \$2.00) four dollars.

5th. The like advance upon the unsold lands.

Immediately after the parol purchase, Mr. Abraham M. Schermerhorn of Rochester became interested in one equal undivided ninth part of the same. The agency of Mr. Peacock who had long been in the employ of the Holland Company was continued, the title of the property for convenience and security remained in the Holland Company, and the business was transacted in their name. The purchasers, Messrs. Cary, Lay and Sch^{* R}ermerhorn paid to the Holland Company in advance \$50,000. Owing to the delay necessary in preparing a statement of the multitude of contracts the contract was not reduced to writing and executed, and rests still in parol but the parties have proceeded under the same as if executed. The business of the office progressed very well during the year. The receipt at the Land Office amounted to \$174,000 during the year 1835. But owing to circumstances unnecessary to detail, involving misfortune on the part of the agent, and fault on the part of both proprietors and occupants much misunderstanding arose which resulted in an unprecedented scene of popular violence. After a winter spent in agitation a mob assembled at Mayville in March, demolished the office and destroyed the books and papers. The Agent fled in consternation and all business was suspended. I was about the first of June at New York. Ill health produced by too unremitted confinement and labor in my profession had determined

* This should be spelled Schermerhorn

me to seek some escape from it. In this situation Messrs. Cary, Lay and Schemerhorn hoping much as they were pleased to say from the favorable opinion which they supposed to be entertained by the settlers concerning me, and more from some adaptation of manners which they supposed me to possess for such business, proposed to me to assume the agency of their affairs.

After some negotiation the matter resulted in an arrangement whereby Mr. Cary retains two ninths, Mr. Lay one ninth, Mr. Schemerhorn two ninths, Mr. Rathbone two ninths, and myself two ninths of the purchase as it was originally made. I assume the entire management of the business and have engaged to it my best exertions for five years or such lesser period as shall be necessary to bring the business to a conclusion.

It was my intention to open an office in Chautauque on the first of July, but owing to the delays consequent upon the transcribing of books and papers from the duplicates which fortunately had been preserved in the Land office (general land office of the company) at Batavia, I was prevented doing so until the 23rd of July. I have in the meantime prepared the contract to be executed between the present proprietors and the Holland Company. The same is approved by the Company and is ready for execution.

On the 23rd of July I established an office at Westfield deeming it expedient to remove the office to that place from Mayville the source of the former disturbance.

This removal as I apprehended called down upon us the resentment of the people of Mayville to whom the location of the office among them was a source of much advantage and indeed the principal resource of their place. With the confidence which was derived from the successful violence they had witnessed they appealed to the passions of the people, and I was not without apprehension of consequences injurious. But I had adopted reasonable and liberal terms and I have not been disappointed."

* My salary m. \$5000. per year

And so it was that on July 23, 1836, William H. Seward made his initial visit to Chautauqua County. Those of us who live here should be much pleased with his first impressions as expressed in his letter to his wife written the next day from Westfield, in which he says: "We - - left Fredonia with the most favorable impression of the beauty of the village and the enterprise and hospitality of the people - - - from Fredonia to Westfield, fourteen miles. We took an extra stage to this place, and passed over the great thoroughfare within two to four miles of the lake-shore. Certainly my eye never rested upon a finer country. - - We found Westfield still more beautiful than Fredonia. At four oclock on Friday we passed over to Mayville, the county town, and the locality of the old office. Nature has few more beautiful scenes than that which is displayed on this road."

With lodgings and office quarters opened in Gales Hotel, located where the National Bank of Westfield now stands, Seward soon had business running smoothly. With the birth of a daughter in Auburn, Mrs. Seward was not able to join him but he soon drew to himself many friends and was called upon constantly for social engagements. His personal charm and wit made him a much sought after guest. Two examples of his sense of humor might help visualize the man. In speaking of his clerks in the office he wrote: "One is very busily engaged in that chief of all pleasures - courtship. It must be an unusual case if it can last much longer without resolving itself into coffee and toast for two." Again let me quote an answer

he made to an inquisitive woman during Civil War times when she inquired the destination of a secret movement of troops. "Madam," he said, "if I did not know, I would tell you."

The Summer was very successfully spent straightening out the affairs of the settlers, and payments for land came in at a remarkable rate. Mr. Seward had gained the confidence of the people but his real problems came from an unexpected direction. The year 1835 had brought boom times throughout the whole nation and with it the rankest kind of real estate speculations and so the new proprietors had felt that the Chautauqua lands could be rapidly sold, and the Holland Company quickly paid. But with President Jackson's shutting down on the Bank of the United States, national finances began to tighten and banks had no money to lend. Thurlow Weed having his fingers on the pulse of the nation, not only politically but also economically foretold coming trouble in his letter to Seward dated at Albany, 8th Sept., 1836. "Things look blue enough in money matters. Speculation has probably run its length. The bubble must soon burst. Buffalo must pass through a severe ordeal. "

Mr. Seward could not long enjoy the life at a village tavern and on September 22nd, 1836, he moved into the "McClurg Mansion." It is interesting to note that this house came into possession of the Village of Westfield this past year. In writing about it on that date he said:

"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 own hired family, around me. In truth, I became very lonely and uncomfortable at the tavern. I yesterday morning notified Sarah Scott

that I could wait no longer, and forthwith I began to move. My wardrobe was soon removed from the trunks; my papers were deposited in the hall. Just at this time John Birdsall called on me. I begged of Mr. Gale a loaf of bread and a bottle of Santa Cruz rum. Sarah found the pork-barrel, and pulled some green corn in the garden, and in an hour Birdsall and I sat down to a good dinner, with none to molest us or make us afraid.

I know you will be delighted with the house when you come to see it in the summer. It stands in the centre of grounds of several acres, ornamented with trees and shrubbery. It has a double piazza in front of the centre or main building, and is two stories high. The arrangement of the rooms is this: In the centre, a hall about twenty feet wide; off this, in the rear, an octagon parlor, which opens in to the shrubbery of 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 that I have freedom."

It was not until 1863 that Thanksgiving was fixed as the last Thursday in November, and so we find a letter early in December, 1836, from T. W. Patchin of Jamestown, inviting Mr. Seward for Thanksgiving dinner on Thursday, December 15th, where he would meet several men together with "their ladies." It so happened that the weather was so bad that it was impossible to get to Jamestown, so after hearing the Episcopal minister (Mr. Huse) preach a sermon in the Presbyterian church, "At four o'clock, which, you must know, is my regular dinner-hour, Harriet served us a fine roasted turkey and

a venison-steak. My party consisted of all the clerks in the office together with the wife of one of them."

Christmas Eve found another large dinner party with Mr. Seward as host. This time both Mr. Huse, the Episcopal rector, and Mr. Gregory, the Presbyterian minister, were among the guests. After dinner they all adjourned to the service at St. Peter's Episcopal church where "the sermon seemed to please the throng that crowded in every aisle and nook."

Before the first of January, 1837, many settlers had made payments on their lands and by February over eight hundred land contracts had been exchanged for deeds, and the proprietors had taken back bonds and mortgages for the unpaid debts of the settlers. Business continued at an active rate and at this time beside Mr. Seward, there were nine clerks in the office. In March of this year he persuaded his brother, B. J. Seward, to join him in Westfield and be an equal partner with him. This permitted him to be absent from Chautauqua County for longer periods of time and he bent all of his efforts toward refinancing their affairs. Economic conditions throughout the land became steadily worse and the five partners, though they were all considered men of wealth, were unable to meet their obligations with the Holland Company. By May all of the banks in the country were closed and things looked black indeed. Since payments were impossible, Mr. J. J. Vanderkemp, agent for the Hollanders, took the only reasonable course of action and gave them more time to get their affairs in shape.

Through all these months a constant stream of letters kept coming from Thurlow Weed, sometimes on business, sometimes on politics and sometimes on personal matters, as for instance the following dated

Sunday, June 25, 1837

"Many thanks, Dear Seward, for your most interesting letter. How many warm hearts welcomed your return to Auburn? There was true enjoyment in that. A man can afford to endure toil and anxiety for the luxury of making himself and so many kindred spirits, who live for him, happy. Long, long may they and you live to enjoy the delights of "Home". I rejoice to hear that Mrs. Seward and the Boys go to Westfield. There will be much in the excursion to interest them. I am sure Mrs. Seward will like Westfield."

Weed's fluent style makes all his letters very interesting.

Again he writes to Seward:

"I went to the boat at 5 to see Granger off in the Robert L. Stevens, but just as they cried "all ashore that's agoing", I espied Kent beckoning to me from the "Utica". I ran to him, went on board, and did just as I should if it had been yourself -- let the Boat carry me off to Poughkeepsie."

At a later date he says:

"Thanks for your good, long letter. It was very welcome. I stood "bolt upright" in the street and read every word of it. I want above all things to be with you in Chautauque."

Mr. Seward delivered the Commencement address at the Westfield School before a very large audience in which he appealed for higher education for women. This drew national comment and Weed's letter of Aug. 14, 1837, said: "You have made a most creditable effort, My dear Seward, for the cause of Education. I have read it with a pleasure which was not anticipated. The views are indeed "practical" and are presented with a force of argument and a clearness of illustration which will render them most useful."

Always a regular church attendant, William H. Seward was baptized in St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Westfield by his friend, Mr. Huse, the Rector, on March 26, 1837, and was confirmed there by Bishop Onderdonk on Aug. 16, 1837.

Work in the office through the Summer was at a reduced level. The hard times had reached every section of the nation and the only money which was available was the currency of the banks in the South and West and this was of little value and so rather than accept this depreciated paper money, they stopped to a large extent, accepting payments from the settlers. Much as the Holland Company was insisting upon payments coming to them they recognized this as the only logical method of procedure. At this time Seward and his associates still owed on their debt in excess of \$600,000 most of which was past due. A large part of the correspondence during this period was with the American Life Insurance and Trust Co. of Philadelphia and the Bank of the United States. Both institutions were trying to help raise money abroad. On Aug. 15, 1837, Dr. Patrick Macauley, President of the American Life Insurance & Trust Co. writes "the rich and eminent Bankers, Messrs. Groh, Prescott & Ames & Co. of London are handling it (the sale of your securities). The prospect of success for your negotiations increases abroad daily - our credit will be good in Europe in a few months, as the merchants of the United States have made extraordinary efforts to deserve it."

During this time Mr. Seward had not divorced himself from politics and he played an important part in the elections that Fall in which the Whig victories were overwhelming. On Nov. 11, 1837, Mr. Rathbone,

one his partners, writes that since the election stocks immediately have enhanced in value because of the restoration of confidence as a result of the election. By the following month conditions had so far improved that plans for refunding the entire debt were well under way.

The early part of the year 1838 completed their refinancing with the Holland Company and Mr. Seward turned actively to the political career which was to occupy the balance of his lifetime. In the Fall he was elected Governor with a substantial majority and so the affairs of the Chautauqua office were left in the hands of B. J. Seward, under a Power of Attorney.

During the Winter of 1839-1840 at William H. Seward's direction, the Farnsworth house on North Portage Street, now occupied by Mr. and Mrs. F. W. Crandall, was remodeled into its present state and B. J. Seward lived there until 1841, when it was purchased by George W. Patterson, who at that time succeeded William H. Seward as Agent.

Though this ended Mr. Seward's official connection in Westfield it did not sever his interest in Chautauqua County as evidenced by his regular correspondence with Mr. Patterson through all his later years - even including a letter from Washington in the 60's asking to be sent two firkins of "good Chautauqua County butter .