"WALTER SMITH AND HIS TIMES"

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City Historian

The man we shall discuss today came to Western New York to seek his fortune at the age of nineteen. Yet in spite of his youth he possessed talents of almost Homeric proportions. In fact his leadership and ability were such we can rightly call him the true founder of the city of Dunkirk.

What sort of a place was Dunkirk in the early days of the 19th century, when the United States was still in its infancy? Just a convenient stopping-place for hordes of seekers after land and wealth on the way to the great unexplored territory of the mid-west: a place to land goods for the more settled communities springing up in Western New York, Ohio and Pennsylvania, for Dunkirk had one of the best and most accessible harbors on Lake Erie at that time.

But to settle in Dunkirk — what could it offer an ambitious land-hungry young man? Just a meagre strip of coast-line, with a few log huts hugging the harbor, closed in by the lake and a gloomy water-logged forest.

Yet just south of it was Fredonia, three miles inland, already showing promise of a vigorous commercial and social life. It even boasted a weekly newspaper, well-filled with advertisements. A civilized village where the Rev'd Jonn Spencer and Pastor Joy Handy had brought the Gospel, and now had three churches where one could worship on the sabbath; a school for children: an emerging culture; a village surrounded by prosperous farms — a growing community showing evidence of healthy progress.

But Dunkirk! There was talk of making it the terminus of the Erie Canal, but Buffalo was to have that, with its new artificial harbor and its growing population.

There was a man in Fredonia who had plans for Dunkirk: a brilliant man, with courage and determination. He had already gained quite a reputation as a clever business man. Walter Smith was his name. Yes, Smith. A common enough name it is true. You can find over 100 Smiths.
in the Dunkirk and Fredonia telephone directories. Where did this familiar name originate? Probably several thousand years ago: blacksmith, copper-smith, silver-smith, gold-smith, skilful workers in metal, creators of things needful, things useful, things beautiful. Beginning with Genesis, you find smith's mentioned a number of times in the Bible. In the 24th chapter of Jeremiah, the prophet records when King Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem, "he took the craftsmen and smiths and ...brought them to Babylon". The 2nd Book of the Kings claimed there were 1,000 of them!

Now Walter Smith might have done some black-smitning on his father's farm, but it is doubtful he had the skills of a true blacksmith. He had other talents, as we shall see.

He was born at Weathersfield, Conn., on March 23, 1800. When he was 15, he was apprenticed to Jacob Ten Eyck who operated a general store at Cazenovia, New York, to learn merchandizing. He proved so capable and industrious, that four years later, Mr Ten Eyck offered to set him up in his own business, sending him west to find a promising community. So he started off, and finally landed in Fredonia. This seemed to be just the town he wanted — a thriving, progressive community with possibilities of growth. He bought out the bankrupt store of Joseph and Ralph Plumb, Mr Ten Eyck advancing the purchase price. In the first 12 months he cleared $20,000, and paid his benefactor's loan in full. Within five years, his profits increased to $75,000 a year. Remember, this was in 1825, and his profits were not inflated dollars of 1976!

Two important events occurred in his life in 1825: first he fell in love with a lovely girl — Minerva Pomeroy Abel, daughter of Pomeroy Abel, owner of the Abel hotel. They were married, May 2nd, 1825.

In 1824, President James Monroe invited the Marquis Marie Joseph Lafayette to visit the United States. This great hero of the Revolution accepted. Walter Smith seems to have manipulated enough strings to get Lafayette to visit Fredonia, arranging his itinerary from Cincinnati to
Erie, and thence to Dunkirk. The Marquis arrived in New York State on June 4, 1825, arriving in Fredonia the next day. He was accorded a tremendous welcome, as befitting a great soldier who had fought and been wounded in the great struggle for American Independence.

The local detachment of the 169th Regiment of Foot, specially drilled for the occasion, and newly equipped with uniforms and rifles, acted as escort for the distinguished visitor, with two Brigadier Generals in attendance, Generals Leverett Barker and Elijah Risley. The enthusiasm of the villagers was overwhelming; old soldiers of the Revolution wept with joy as they met their beloved Commander.

The village was brilliantly lighted with the recently installed gas-lights; the decorations were superb; the ladies outdid themselves in lavishlyness of the refreshments. Most of the festivities took place at the Abel Hotel or on a platform erected for the occasion. In June 1975, the Daughters of the American Revolution, aided by members of the state college, reenacted this event, and our County Historian, Miss Elizabeth Crocker, was responsible for arrangements. A plaque commemorating this great event was placed on the Russo Building, which is on the site of the Abel Hotel.

Following the celebration in Fredonia, Lafayette was escorted to Dunkirk, where he was greeted by the leaders of the community, and then boarded the Steamship "Superior" for Buffalo, Walter Smith accompanying him. A 21 gun salute was given him from a battery on shore, the steamship replying with a similar salute.

Mr. Smith moved to Dunkirk in 1826, being aware of the potential of the harbor. Illustrating his wisdom and thoughtfulness, he figured the harbor would be superior to that of Buffalo because the ice cleared two weeks earlier, so he purchased a half-interest in the settlement, for $10,000, from the Dunkirk Land Company, and initiated a wagon service to Warren, Pa., also regular state coach.
service to most neighboring communities. He prevailed on the Buffalo ship owners to use Dunkirk as a port-of-call, which added greatly to the business of the village.

Next he became aware of the lack of security due to the absence of Lighthouses in the Dunkirk area of the Lake, requiring influence with the federal government to obtain, and Chautauqua County had no representation in Washington. An ambitious lawyer had made quite an impression on Walter Smith — Daniel Garnsey, who came to Dunkirk in 1817. He was a restless man, intensely interested in politics, a field in which he became successful because of his legal knowledge, his ready wit, native eloquence and pleasing personality. He had served as surrogate, and was now the county's first district attorney who lived in it. Walter decided he would make a good congressman. Walter had a good deal of influence now, so he and some of his friends worked for his election. Garnsey was duly elected, and by 1827 Walter got his lighthouse. Garnsey also obtained two more — one at Barcelona, and one at Silver Creek.

Next Walter Smith looked at his village. There were a few ladies operating small private schools, one close to the Fredonia line. But village needed a regular school in the village itself. So Walter built a two-story brick school on 3rd Street near Center. He also offered the 2nd story on Sundays for worship to the Baptists and Presbyterians, neither of which were large enough or wealthy enough to build churches.

Now a word on how Walter Smith did business. In those years few people had hard cash, and barter was the usual method of doing business. So the cash Smith received in the course of a year never exceeded 10% of the goods he sold. The primary source of the settlers income came from the forest. Burning the trees, they obtained black salts, potash and pearl ash. Walter Smith traded groceries, utensils, tools and furniture, for their wood-products and farm produce.
Smith's receipts were accepted at other stores as "hard cash". He in turn sold provisions and black powder to army forts and garrisons stationed on the Great Lakes. He also sold potash and pearl ash through his agents in Montreal and New York.

Writing years later, he wrote "In order to furnish the farmers for their produce, I obtained a contract to supply the government stations along the lakes with provisions, and the farmers in Chautauqua County furnished everything needed except white beans, which I purchased in Ohio".

Smith also presented to the village five acres of land to be used for an academy when it was needed. This was a choice lot between Eagle and Swan Streets. He also gave the large plat bounded by Buffalo and Elk, Fifth and Sixth Streets for a village park.

About the year 1829, there was much discussion concerning a railroad to develop the newly opened Western New York, and the area in Ohio called the "Western Reserve". While there were a number of small railroads in the East, there was no railroad of the length projected. It would be a stupendous project, and many people ridiculed it as impossible. But Walter Smith was interested. A railroad was exactly what his Dunkirk and Chautauqua County needed. He was acquainted with Eliazur Lord, who would one day be the new railroad's first president; the New York businessman, William G. Redfield, later known as "The Father of Erie"; and the railroad's outstanding champion, the influential Judge Philip Church.

Walter Smith joined them in Albany during the winters of 1830-31, where they influenced the Legislature to consider, and in spite of the furious opposition of the canal interests, to finally pass a Charter for the New York and Erie Railroad on April 24, 1832. Its Eastern terminus was to be across the Hudson from New York City at the village of Piermont; the Western terminus was to be Dunkirk. When it was completed, it would be the first "trunk line" across New York State.

Dunkirk now had between 300 and 400 inhabitants in 1832. Most of its people were farmers. There was then a wheat field on the site of
of the Brooks Hospital. There were only 15 streets in the village — if they could be called streets — incredibly muddy in spring and fall; heavy with snow in the winter, dusty in summer. Beyond the unpaved streets was the dense forest, broken occasionally by a farm house. Business was chiefly on Front Street. There was Walter Smith's big store, where according to his ad in the "Dunkirk Beacon", there could be obtained "A Great Assortment of Merchandise".

Another advertisement announces "The Steamboat 'William Peacock' under the command of Captain W. E. Pratt sails daily between Buffalo and Dunkirk, leaving Buffalo at 8 a.m., Arriving at Dunkirk at 1 p.m, ... in time for the Jamestown and Western Stages"— leaves Dunkirk at half-past two p.m., "Weather Permitting".

After Walter Smith's arrival, Dunkirk had changed. The heavy growth of trees was cleared from the banks of the lake; the adjoining swamps had been drained. Mr Smith had built sturdy docks at Center and Buffalo Streets. More than a dozen ships called daily at the Harbor.

But one more thing was necessary in a farming community. Dunkirk had no grist-mill. But mills at Fredonia ought to be adequate. The trouble was, ladders had to cope with the dreadful condition of Fredonia Road (As upper Central Avenue was then called). It was uneven, full of tree-stumps; several creeks crossed it, making it impassable during heavy rain and snow, and mud, particularly in the deep gullies the creeks had made; so passage was out of the question from four to six months of the year.

As usual, Walter Smith solved the problem. He would build, not only a grist-mill, but also a saw-mill. He would build a mill-race from the Canadaway Creek, through the three miles of heavy tangled forest between Dunkirk and the Creek. Hundreds of great trees — all virgin timber had to be felled, followed by the back-breaking task of clearing the stumps — not with bull-dozers — but with saw, pick-axe, shovel and axe, plus lots of good strong men. Digging the channel would be another job: weeks and weeks of digging, with as many men Walter Smith could
The mill-race crossed Temple Road, moved east on what is now Willow Road, across Brigham Road and the Brigham Brook; north-east over what is now Lucas Avenue to a large pond, half-a-mile long and four hundred yards wide, into which Crooked Brook entered from the south-east; the mill-race came out of the pond near West 6th Street, where a dam was built, its spill-way being the Crooked Brook. Crossing three streets over which bridges were built, it continued on the left side of Robin, taking a diagonal course to Front Street, then north to the lake on the site of the present Mullett Street. The Grist-mill was built between Robin Street and the site of Pike Street facing West 3rd.

An old letter written by Robert Mullett, who remembered it as a boy:

"It was quite a large building and contained four-run of stone, I often paid a visit to it ... attracted chiefly by the great water-wheel slowly turning ... it must have been 20 feet in diameter ... the first wheat in it was ground December 31, 1832".

Leaving the grist-mill, the mill-race flowed north-east, where a dam was built to hold it back in a catch-basin where the water was seven feet deep, thus supplying enough power to run the saw-mill which was on the bank of the lake. Again, quoting Robert Mullett: "The saw-mill was open underneath, and in its further limit, was a deep, dark pool ... in which fat rock-bass loved to linger. Perched on a beam above it, I often persuaded them the outside air was better".

In my copy of the Dunkirk Beacon, dated Dec. 8th, 1835, there is this advertisement: "DUNKIRK MILLS. The subscriber having made the necessary arrangements at his Grist-Mill for doing custom work, informs the public that he is now ready to do their milling in a prompt and faithful manner. December 8th, 1835. W. Smith".

The venture was evidently profitable, for Walter Smith bought three vessels to transport his grain: "The "Samuel B. Rugles, "James G. King" and "William C. Bucknor". named after directors of the projected railroad."
Thus, for the next 25 years, the grist-mill served the local farmers faithfully.

Walter Smith was a man with incurable optimism. A railroad was to be built. Therefore the population of Dunkirk must grow. More people would visit it. New business would develop. The several small hotels in the village would be insufficient. Therefore he would build a fine metropolitan hostelry for Dunkirk, not realizing that the railroad would take another 19 years before it would reach the village, or that the country was due for a panic that would bankrupt the county. He was going to build his hotel. He chose a site on the south-west corner of Center and Third streets, and on it he would build a hostelry worthy of Dunkirk's expected prosperity. In 1855 its foundations were dug. Its walls were erected, built of native brick and by 1836 the roof and cupola were installed. It was a large building, three or four stories high, 60 feet square, with a skylight in the cupola. Dr George E. Blackham (1845-1928), who remembered it well, described it thus: "A huge, square building with several great sandstone pillars in a Greek portico on its east front and a large cupola on top, which lighted a well extending down throughout all floors to the ground floor............ It was a pretentious affair at the beginning, run in high style, with Negro waiters and with as many metropolitan frills as possible". He also mentioned "To the south of the Loder House were vacant lots until you crossed Fourth Street".

The name "Loder House" was probably adopted about 1845, for Benjamin Loder was elected ninth President of the railroad in August that year; and he was then a retired businessman who started out as a school teacher; went into the ready-to-wear industry and amassed a huge fortune. He was responsible for raising the necessary $3,000,000 to finish the railroad, and a close friend of Walter Smith.

Now the railroad was making money. Dunkirk was already a busy place as track was laid eastward. Buildings were built for machine shops, and...
and round-houses to repair locomotives.

In 1837, Dunkirk now boasted a population of 638, and the leaders of the village decided the community ought to be incorporated. Again Walter Smith and his friends set out for Albany, returning triumphantly with the necessary Articles of Incorporation. The New order of business was to elect officers for the incorporated village. By vote of the village property owners, Walter Smith was unanimously elected first President of the village.

About this time, the parents of the village began to demand their children be given an opportunity to obtain an education beyond the elementary level. Therefore a number of prominent citizens met and organized the "Dunkirk Academy". The group chose Dr. Ezra Williams, George A. French, and the Rev. Timothy Stillman as trustees, who inserted this advertisement in the "Dunkirk Beacon":

**DUNKIRK ACADEMY**

"This institution will be open on Wednesday the 23rd inst., under the superintendence of Mr. Albert Clarke, late principal of the Academy at Owego.

The year will be divided into three terms instead of four, the first and second of 15 weeks, and the third of 16 weeks. The price of tuition by the term will be:

- For classical studies and the French language, $5.00
- For common branches of English Education, $4.00
- The Primary Department, $2.00

... May we add that the experience of Mr. Clarke, will give this institution as good advantages as can be obtained elsewhere.

Ezra Williams
George A. French
Timothy Stillman, Trustees".

These men applied to the state legislature for an act of incorporation.
which was granted on May 1st, 1837. That September, classes commenced on the second floor of the 3rd Street school house.

Northern Chautauqua County was quite prosperous during the 1830's, and because Dunkirk was to be the Western terminus of the new Railroad, there was wild speculation in real estate. Lots on the Brigham Road were selling for $3,000 apiece. Judge Emory F. Warren in his book "Sketches of Chautauqua County," published in Jamestown in 1846, wrote: "The speculations in real estate which were at their height during this period, and which resulted in incalculable injury to the village of Dunkirk more seriously than any other point in the county. The general result has been the stagnation of trade, depreciation of all kinds of property, the ruin and prostration of many families... It was of course one of the many factors in the financial panic of 1837."

Walter Smith suffered severely from the disaster which bankrupted the little community, losing much valuable property by foreclosure. However, he was shrewd enough to retain a considerable portion of his negotiable fortune. When land decreased in value, he bought some of it back at a fraction of its former price, thus remaining an alert business man.

For instance, he bought a half-interest in the Dunkirk Land Company for $10,000 in 1825; sold it to New York Speculators for $20,800 in 1837, and during the panic bought it back for $7,000!

In 1843 he left Dunkirk to become manager of an iron foundry at Vermillion, Ohio, returning to Dunkirk permanently in 1852, settling with his wife, three daughters and one son in their former residence at 436 Center Street.

His love for Dunkirk and his people, his outstanding generosity were expressed in many ways:

He assisted many settlers in the area by advancing to them the down-payment on the property they had selected, allowing them to pay him back with the black salts, potash and pearl-ash they obtained by burning the
trees on their land. Then when their farms were planted and producing, he would market the produce for them.

Another little-known instance of his liberality, occurred in 1825, with the purchase of the fuel to run the steamship "Superior" when she transported General Lafayette from Dunkirk to Buffalo.

The only office Walter Smith ever held after he was elected President of the Village in 1837, was that of the lowly position of "pathmaster". He was required to see the sidewalks of the village were laid and kept in good repair. These were then composed of hemlock boards, and the property owners were responsible for their installation and repair. But during his tenure, generous Walter Smith spent $10,000 of his own money, in most instances assisting the poorer members of local households.

Charles J. Dow wrote of him, "Scarcely a farm was cleared, a building built or a highway opened that he did not in some way give assistance".

His last public appearance seems to have been at the Convention of the old pioneers of the county who gathered in an impressive meeting at Fredonia, on June 10, 1873. Walter Smith was one of the vice-presidents of those arriving early, most of whom had settled in Chautauqua County in the early 1800's. He was invited to speak, but declined, on the plea of his illness and feebleness.

He died eighteen months later, on September 21st, 1874. An eloquent tribute was paid to him by his friend, the Hon Hanson A. Hisley, who said in part: "He leaves behind a bright example of all those manly qualities which give to life its value and reward...There was nothing trivial, narrow or false in his character. He had no aims but were worthy, no aspirations but to extend means and opportunity for usefulness. In all his changing fortunes, under bright or clouded skies, he was always the same genial, intelligent companion, worthy and upright citizen, true and steadfast friend".

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