A Possible Link Between Economic Growth and a Reforming Spirit
in
Northern Seneca County in the Antebellum Years

The Seneca Falls-Waterloo area was a hotbed of reforming zeal in the years preceding the Civil War. An examination of some basic facts regarding the economic and transportation developments of this time period and the people living here at that time help greatly to explain why there was so much reforming activity in this area at this time.

When Seneca County was created out of the western portion of Cayuga County in March 1804, Seneca County was not an industrial area. People knew of the agricultural potential of this area and they knew about the falls/rapids on the Seneca River at what would become later the community of Seneca Falls and Waterloo. It was not easy for potential settlers, however, to reach Seneca County. It could easily take as much as six weeks for a person to come from New York City whether he chose the "southern" route up the Susquehanna River and then overland or the "northern" route of the Hudson and Mohawk Rivers and then basically overland.

A series of important transportation developments "opened up" Seneca County for settlement and economic development. As early as 1789 the State of New York had begun development of the Genesee Road westward from Utica. Basically using old Indian trails and widening them a little by cutting down trees, people moving west could use this turnpike and travel by their own wagon or by stagecoach. This usually meant stopping about every ten miles so that the horses could be rested, watered and fed, as well as the people. Typically there was a toll house every ten miles. Travel was fairly easy but slow until one got to our county area. Then a major obstacle arose—getting across Cayuga Lake or through the Montezuma marsh. It was easier to cross the lake by ferry boat but that was no easy task. As early as 1789 James Bennett and John Harris were operating a ferry between what is today Cayuga and Bridgeport. This was a pretty rudimentary facility—a rough boat propelled sometimes by oar and sometimes by sail. One can easily understand its limited capacity—be it passenger or cargo—and how it slowed down westward movement because of the need to transfer from stage coach or loaded wagon to the ferry and then reloading again on the other side of the lake. It was the only real option, however, for about eleven years.

In 1800 the first bridge across Cayuga Lake was completed to avoid use of the existing ferry service. At a reported cost of $150,000, this Cayuga Lake Bridge was one mile and eight rods in length—the longest wooden bridge at the time in the entire western hemisphere. It was wide enough for three carts to pass at a time. The tolls were as much as $1 for a four-wheeled pleasure carriage with two horses; 37.5 cents for a sled and horses; 25 cents for a man and horse; 6 cents for a cow and 1.5 cents for a hog, sheep or calf. All persons living within one mile were to pass over on foot free at all times. All persons going to or from public worship on the Sabbath were exempt from payment. Until the advent of the railroad after 1841, this Cayuga Lake Bridge was a major link in the westward movement of people.

Economic development in the Seneca Falls-Waterloo area was greatly stimulated by the waterfalls/rapids on the Seneca River. These waterfalls, however, were an obstacle to transportation on the river. Businessmen realized the need for canal locks to get around the existing waterfalls in both Seneca Falls and Waterloo. The Seneca Lock Navigation Company opened portions of the first Cayuga-Seneca Canal in 1818. The first loaded boat passed through the locks at Seneca Falls on June 14. It came from Schenectady and carried a cargo of 16 tons.

The lockage toll was fifty cents. The entire canal between the lakes, which was completed in 1821, made use of 8 stone locks and 1.72 miles of dug canal in addition to sections of the river. Through Seneca Falls there was a lock for every important mill site, raising or lowering the boats through Seneca Falls a total of 42 feet.

The Erie Canal was completed in 1825 and passed through the northeast corner of Seneca County. The State of New York quickly realized the economic importance of connecting the existing Cayuga-Seneca Canal with the Erie Canal. New York State paid the Seneca Lock Navigation Company $53,603.53 for the rights to the existing Cayuga-Seneca Canal and paid out $160,396.78 in new construction costs to make this link. In this twenty-one mile distance from Seneca Lake, there were a total of eleven locks providing a total lifting and lowering of 83.5 feet between Seneca Lake and the Erie Canal at Montezuma.

This new Cayuga-Seneca Canal had momentous economic impact upon Seneca County. The Waterloo and Seneca Falls areas were now connected with the outside world by a very practical and improved transportation system. The towpath constructed along the canal route meant that now boats were towed by mules and horses rather than polled by man power. Fleets of canal boats bearing farm produce and merchant goods floated to and through the villages of Waterloo and Seneca Falls. Rates on the Erie Canal (5 mills per ton-mile) were much less than the nearby competing Cayuga Lake Bridge (30 cents per ton-mile). Packet boats carrying people for business or pleasure were competing with the stage coach. One can hardly emphasize enough the economic impact of this. Now it was possible for Pennsylvania coal to be brought north via the Chemung River and Seneca Lake to Geneva and then via the Cayuga-Seneca Canal to the Erie Canal and then to Albany and New York City. Imagine!

The Erie Canal stimulated the economic growth and population growth of New York State, making it truly the Empire State. The counties surrounding the Erie Canal in Western New York were the fastest growing portion of the entire United States in the years 1825-1835. The success of the Erie Canal stimulated the building of many other canals throughout the country. The so-called Canal Era, however, was short-lived because of the advent of railroads. Unlike the seasonal nature of canals, railroads could operate year-round. The first railroad came through Seneca Falls on Monday, July 5, 1841. It wasn't until September 1841 that the long railroad bridge over Cayuga Lake was completed—the last piece in the train route from Syracuse to Auburn to Geneva to Rochester. One must remember that these early trains were not very comfortable. The first trains operating in our area were a train of two passenger cars carrying fifteen to sixteen passengers plus an engine. It ran about ten miles per hour and stopped often. It ran on wooden rails that had iron strips (known as "snake heads"). On many occasions, one end of a snake head would come loose and would come up through the bottoms of the car and hurt passengers.

Trains quickly became the major means of transporting goods and people. From 1841 to about mid-1853, the route of all trains going west from Albany to Buffalo went through Seneca Falls. (It was on April 2, 1853, that the New York State legislature consolidated the various railroad lines to form the New York Central Railroad and its main line was routed through Lyons, several miles north of Seneca County.) One cannot emphasize enough the implications of the fact that Seneca Falls was on the main route west—at a time in our nation's history when we seemed obsessed with "manifest destiny." Obviously, Seneca Falls and Waterloo suffered a great loss when the New York Central Railroad main line was relocated about 1853 through Lyons. But, for a full decade, however, Seneca Falls was a bustling train stop—bringing goods and people. This also meant that new ideas were coming into our area in the process.

Having discussed the key transportation developments that would lay the basis for economic growth in the Seneca Falls-Waterloo area, attention can now be turned to the key economic developments taking place. The existing waterfalls/rapids on the Seneca River were important potential sources of water power for mills and later other industries. As early as 1793, Samuel Bear had built a grist mill at the rapids at Skoi-Yase (today the southern part of the village of Waterloo). In 1795, the first sawmill was built on The Flats (one large island and a few small islands in the Seneca River) in what is today the village of Seneca Falls. It was built by Wilhelmus Mynderse, who the next year built a flouring mill and a second flouring mill in 1807. Prior to the Civil War, many industries making use of existing water power would develop in The Flats. These include the Downs & Co. that in 1824 took over a fulling mill for manufacturing purposes, the first knitting mill in 1830, the first pump-making company in 1840, the Seneca Woolen Mill in 1840, and the first hand-held fire engine company in Seneca Falls in 1849.

This economic growth had a significant impact upon population growth. Laborers and stone masons had come to help build the Cayuga-Seneca Canal and the Erie Canal. Many of them stayed here to work in the new industries developing and many other immigrants came also to work in these industries. The existing canals and railroads made for easy and cheap transportation from New York City to Seneca Falls and Waterloo. The influx of different peoples and the movement of goods helped to bring about an infusion of new ideas, helping to create a climate for reform movements. Individuals were being drawn to Seneca Falls and Waterloo because of the opportunities for personal gain. For example, Henry Stanton, husband of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, moved his family from Boston to Seneca Falls in 1847 because of the economic opportunities he saw in this growing community. Some residents were becoming quite well-off. They built homes reflecting their wealth. These homes would become places for relatives and friends to visit. An example of this is the July 8, 1848, ladies' tea at the home of Richard and Jane Hunt which was to be a reunion with Lucretia Mott, a Philadelphia resident. It turned out to be a gathering of five ladies who would decide to call the first woman's rights convention in Seneca Falls on July 19-20, 1848.

Hopefully, so far the case has been built that we had the key transportation and industrial developments, the resulting population growth and the generation of income, and the influx of goods as well as ideas. Now the focus needs to be turned to the reforming zeal of the so-called Burned-Over District of which Seneca Falls and Waterloo was so much a part. In the decades of the 1820s and 1830s a revivalist zeal swept throughout the United States. This movement was known as the Second Great Awakening. One historian has estimated that only about 10% of the nation's people in 1800 were church members. So, we can safely say there was a need for a religious reawakening. Much of the nation-wide Second Great Awakening took place in central and western New York. So many people were converted to Protestant religions in this area at this time that the area became known as the Burned-Over District. It got this name because it was felt that there were no more people left to be converted. Between 1825 and 1835, there were at least 1343 "revivals" in New York State, most of them in the Burned-Over District. A key preacher was the Rev. Charles Grandison Finney who preached extensively at revivals in the Auburn to Rochester area. Finney stressed that humans have free will and can choose for God. Those embracing this belief—and there were many who did—will logically begin to think that they should help to improve society. They will look at various evils in society and will want to weed out those evils. In other words, the new religious zeal of the Burned-Over District is going to lead to a reforming spirit. The reform movements spawned included abolitionism, woman's rights, woman's dress reform, education, advocacy of peace, asylum building, and religious

reform. We will have the rise of the Millerites and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (more commonly called the Mormon Church). Differences in opinions about the need of their church to become an anti-slavery advocate led to splits within the Methodist Church (creating to Wesleyan Methodist Church) and the Quakers, leading to the formation of the so-called Hicksite Quakers. Interestingly, given the strong anti-slavery sentiment of Quaker groups in the Burned-Over District, as well as the growing economic opportunities of the area, we have the movement from Philadelphia of some key Quaker families such as Thomas and Mary Ann M'Clintock to Waterloo to be a part of the local Hicksite community known as the Junius Monthly Meeting. In 1833, Mary Ann M'Clintock was a founding member, with Lucretia Mott, of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society. In 1842, Thomas and Mary Ann M'Clintock became founding members of the Western New York Anti-Slavery Association when it organized in Rochester. In October 1848, they will be officers in the newly-formed Hicksite community called the Progressive Friends. These Quakers are strongly committed to anti-slavery activism.

It can hardly be emphasized enough that there is a strong link between the anti-slavery reform movement and the woman's rights movement that will be born in northern Seneca County in July 1848. This can be shown in various ways. One way is to simply point out examples of individuals who were close relatives of other key individuals who were anti-slavery activists. Elizabeth Cady Stanton is the cousin of the ardent abolitionist Gerrit Smith. Elizabeth Smith Miller, the advocate of women's dress reform (i.e., "bloomers") is the daughter of Gerrit Smith and, therefore, a cousin of Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Martha Coffin Wright of Auburn is the sister of Lucretia Mott of Philadelphia. (Mott comes to Auburn in the summer of 1848 to help her sister Martha with her birth of a new child. While in the area, she will be the honored guest at the ladies' tea at the Hunt home in Waterloo on July 9, 1848. It will be a "reunion" of female anti-slavery activists.) Susan B. Anthony is the cousin of Amelia Jenks Bloomer.

An important second link between anti-slavery activism and woman's rights can be understood by pointing out that through their involvement in the anti-slavery movement, several women had a heightened consciousness of their inferior status as women. A good example of this is what happened at the world anti-slavery convention in London in 1840. Lucretia Mott and Henry Stanton were delegates from the American Anti-Slavery Society to this convention. Because Henry Stanton and Elizabeth Cady had recently married, Elizabeth accompanied her husband to London as part of their "honeymoon." At the London world anti-slavery convention, the seven female delegates from the United States could not be seated as delegates simply because they were females. Elizabeth Cady Stanton meets Lucretia Mott in the visitors' gallery and they talk. They vow they will call a meeting to talk about that problem—the inferior status of women—when they get settled-in back in the United States. It won't happen, however, until the famous ladies' tea on July 9, 1848.

Another important factor in the link between anti-slavery activism and the woman's rights movement is the acquiring of important leadership skills. Anti-slavery activism meant attending meetings—organizing, publicizing, preparing resolutions to be presented and conducting these meetings became important aspects of this. This meant the learning of important leadership skills that could be used in their own woman's rights movement.

A last factor illustrating the link between anti-slavery activism and the woman's rights movement is to talk specifically about another aspect of the ladies who met for tea at the home of Richard and Jane Hunt on July 9, 1848. All five of the ladies were abolitionists. All but Elizabeth Cady Stanton were Quakers—Quakers tended to believe in the equality of all. Elizabeth Cady

Stanton was not born a Quaker, but she herself said that she was Quaker in her beliefs. Undoubtedly this meant her strong anti-slavery beliefs as well as how she will express it as woman's rights.

There are also some other brief comments that need to be made about other aspects of the involvement of Seneca Falls and Waterloo people in various reform movements. First, there is the intriguing story of the so-called Tear Underground Railroad Route. Allegedly this operation was organized, funded and run exclusively by current and former Seneca Falls residents. Second, we have many anti-slavery petitions being signed by Waterloo residents and sent to Congress. Third, we have many Seneca Falls area residents intimately involved in the Free Soil Party and later the Republican Party. Amelia Jenks Bloomer started publishing *The Lily* as a temperance society newspaper in January 1849, but Mrs. Stanton seized upon the opportunity to use the publication as a voice for woman's rights. Lastly, we have individuals such an Ansel Bascom, the first president of Seneca Falls, who was actively involved in a variety of reform movements.

All in all, it appears that there is a logical link between the economic growth of the Seneca Falls-Waterloo area of Seneca County and the reforming zeal of the Burned-Over District. The key points in this link appear to be as follows:

1. There was a great deal of industrial growth taking place in the Seneca Falls-Waterloo area in the Antebellum years.
2. People (both individuals and ethnic groups) are going to be drawn to the Seneca Falls-Waterloo area because of the potential economic gain.
3. The wealth being generated from the economic growth is creating a rather prosperous class that has the leisure time to be involved in the "hot issues" of the day. These people also have relatives and friends living elsewhere who are in many cases actively involved in these hot issues.
4. Seneca Falls and Waterloo are at the eastern end of the so-called Burned-Over District of Western New York during the Second Great Awakening. Out of this Burned-Over District revivalism will come a strong religious and moral fervor that will spread over into other areas and crusades—such as anti-slavery and temperance. Significantly, many women will be involved. In this Burned-Over District of Western New York will arise new religions, such as the Mormon Church, and various political parties, such as the Liberty Party, the Free Soil Party and perhaps even the Republican Party.
5. There is an interesting inter-twining of the anti-slavery reform movement and other reform movements. This includes the continued interactions of various relatives and close friends.

This is a very important part of the history of Seneca County. Perhaps it was the County's "Golden Age."

[This article was written by Walter Gable, the Seneca County Historian, on May 4, 2005. The article is an outgrowth of a talk he was asked to give to the Seneca Falls Rotary Club on January 11. 2005.]