

# Bethinking of Old Orleans

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MYRON HOLLEY

1779-1844



"The world, taken 'en masse', is a monster, crammed with prejudices, packed with prepossessions, cankered with what it calls virtues, a Puritan, a prig. And the art of life is the art of defiance. To defy -- that is what we ought to live for, instead of living, as we do, to acquiesce."

--Oscar Wilde

Myron Holley whose name remains with one of our villages was one of the most remarkable men of his time and probably one of the most forgotten. If we were to sum up his life in a word it would be iconoclast. Wherever he lived he was always carrying the banner of some unpopular crusade.

Myron Holley was a well-educated man from Connecticut when at 24 years of age in 1803 he came to Canandaigua. The following year he married Sally House who was 18. In Canandaigua he set up a practice of law which ended with his first court case. It seems he was assigned by the court to defend a man indicted for murder. Holley visited the accused in his cell and was convinced of his guilt. He withdrew from the case and closed his practice. Other lawyers thought he was carrying his principles a little too far.

He then opened a book store in Canandaigua and was subsequently elected County Clerk and also a member of the Assembly. In the State Legislature he fought beside DeWitt Clinton for the

establishment of the Erie Canal. In fact, Myron Holley was one of the most influential people in the state in getting that project under way. He was a member of the Canal Commission and its treasurer from 1817 to 1825. During those eight years, he virtually lived on "Clinton's Ditch". He moved to Lyons, N.Y. and rode horseback from job to job overseeing the works. He personally ministered to the diggers stricken with malaria in the Montezuma Swamp and with his own hands buried a negro victim of the cholera in Lyons after others refused.

When Myron Holley made his final accounting of the 2½ million dollars in funds which he had handled as treasurer, there was a deficit of \$30,000. He asked the state to allow him the discrepancy as a commission for his years of service. But the enemies of the canal and Clinton saw that the claim was denied. He was therefore forced to turn over his Lyons property to the state. He fought hard for the return of his property and clearing of his name. An investigation absolved him of misappropriation of funds as many notes were outstanding. He regained his property but the scandal ruined his public career as his enemies always called him "defaulter."

In 1826 a new cause challenged his crusader spirit. It was Anti-Masonic movement which spawned the national Anti-Masonic Party. All this occurred when William Morgan from Genesee County threatened to expose the secrets of Free Masonry. Morgan was supposedly abducted by the Masons and was never heard of again. Thurlow Weed and other ambitious politicians formed the party and Holley was there to champion the cause. He took part in the state and national Anti-Masonic conventions and he published an Anti-Masonic weekly paper out of Lyons. By the mid

1830's, the movement had faded away and Myron Holley had moved to Rochester, only to pick up another cause. He went on many lecture tours fighting for abolition and annoying the supporters of slavery. The Whigs even offered him a nomination for congress if he would keep quiet on the slavery issue. It was rejected with scorn, to say the least.

It was Myron Holley who was instrumental in forming the national Liberty Party whose main objective was abolition. Its chief claim to historical fame rests in the part the party played in establishing the Underground railroad.

In religion, Myron Holley was a Unitarian and in places where he lived and found no liberal church, he conducted his own services for those who would listen. His own parlor was often used for preaching and his audiences included fashionable people and outcasts alike. He abhorred the notion of a fierce, and vengeful God and refused such dogmas as miracles, atonement by blood, original sin, the Trinity and eternal damnation.

He was a gardner, an early riser and never smoked nor drank. He officiated at funerals for those who had no church. He was a gentle man who strove for harmony, truth and justice. His daughter, Sally followed in her father's footsteps and after the Civil War, taught in a negro school in Virginia.

In early 1841 while on a speaking tour, Myron Holley died of what must have been apoplexy at the age of 62. He is buried in Mt. Hope Cemetery in Rochester beneath a large monument erected by the Liberty Party in 1844. The monument bears a simple tribute: "He trusted in God and loved his neighbor."