Rethinking of Old Orleans

C.W. Lattin County Historian

Medina Falls, Medina, N. Y.

Vol. X   "Old Mohammed" 11-3-88   No. 44

How certain places in Orleans County got their names leaves a lot to speculation sometimes. I am reluctant to reinforce old myths or legends just because they are acceptable, clever or convenient. Legends have a way of being reinterpreted by each generation that passes them on. But nonetheless, there are fragments of truth in them and sometimes they are the only bits of evidence we have from the past. I think this is the case with the name of Medina. There have been various stories about how the village of Medina got its name. The following story was written down many years ago by S.C. Bowen of Medina and was found in pencil manuscript form, among his personal effects. It is perhaps a plausable explanation—Believe It Or Not."

"Being a son of two pioneers, I spent many an hour in my boyhood days in consultation with original settlers like Simon Downs, Simeon Bathgate, John G. Bateman, John Clark and scores of others.

"I believe it was Adam Carter, whose life lapped into that of Joseph Ellicott, who told the story of the origin of the name of our village.

"Those who remembered Joseph Ellicott have described him as a genial, good natured sort of fellow, and something like Abraham Lincoln. Full of criticism and drollery, always ready with his jokes.

"Ellicott laid out Batavia, about the center of the Holland Purchase in 1799. Some few years later in the early part of the last century he laid out a village about midway between Batavia and the mouth of the Oak Orchard Creek which he named after his birthplace, Barnegat, NJ. On one side of the creek, the settlement was nicknamed Mecca because a certain quaint character, whose name has passed by memeory, lived there. He was familiarly known as "Old Mohammed" from the fact that he was so strenuous in his belief in Mohammed as the true prophet, and his boring everybody with his discussion and reading of the Koran.

"His religion however, was not 'The kind that saves,' for tradition says it was strongly mixed with immorality. Things came to such a pass after awhile, that at a convention of married men, held one night, it was voted unanimously that "Old Mohammed" must go. The meeting resolved itself into a committee of the whole, and marched to the cabin of the despoiler of their homes, to carry out their resolution and to punish the offender in the rude fashion of those early days." (This consisted of a ride on a fence rail, clothed in tar and goose feathers)..."Old Mohammed was borne to the edge of the clearing, and at the hour of low twelve they turned the scapegoat into the wilderness. They charged home strictly never to return to 'Mecca' under the penalty of death. Nothing was heard of him for some time and people began to query whether he had been devoured by wild beasts of committed suicide. When Joe Ellicott, who continually traveled over the Holland Purchase, came to Barnegat (Shelby Center) a few days later, ha was asked it he had seen or heard anything of 'Mohammed.' With one of his characteristic smiles Joe replied: 'They say that when Mohammed was driven out of Mecca he fled to Medina for safety.'

"A day or two later, Joe discovered him about two and one-half miles down the creek near the Oak Orchard Falls (pictured from an early postcard view), building a log hut where he and his family lived for some years. From the remark of Joe Ellicott, the 'Barnegaters' nicknamed his little burg Medina."

Another record in the handwriting of William Walsh says he moved from Lockport to Oak Orchard (which was the name of Medina) on the fifteenth of November, 1825. However, the "Barnegaters" insisted on calling it Medina, and so it is.